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Navigation Efficacy Among Parents of Public School Children with Special Needs

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Navigation Efficacy Among Parents of Public School Children with Special Needs

by

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This dissertation is dedicated to parents of children with special needs. We all know it requires special parenting.

"When you come to the end of all that you know
You must believe in one of two things:
There will be earth upon which to stand
Or you will be given wings."

Anonymous

To my mother, father and sister for their patience, love and encouragement, and to Chris for his love, support and faith: thank you for helping me find my wings and for sometimes loaning me yours.

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Navigation Efficacy Among Parents of Public School Children with Special Needs

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This study explored the effect of parent racial affiliation and educational attainment on feelings of efficacy navigating the special education referral, assessment and placement process for parents of children with special needs. This study also examined the relationship between perceived efficacy and parent Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting attendance. Parents of children currently receiving special education services in public schools responded to an investigator-developed survey (N=139). Reliability for the School Navigation Survey (Cloth, 2002) was excellent, $\alpha = .946$. Qualitative data were also collected through four focus groups (N=22). Findings from quantitative data analyses did not reveal significant effects of parent racial affiliation and educational attainment on levels of perceived efficacy in the special education process. No significant correlation was detected between low levels of efficacy and low rates of IEP meeting attendance. Overall, participants reported high levels of IEP meeting

attendance. Other characteristics of parents with low levels of efficacy are discussed. An additional analysis of the impact of socio-economic status, as measured by child receipt of a free or reduced price lunch, on levels of efficacy was also not significant. However, this analysis did reveal a trend suggesting total efficacy scores of parents of children receiving a free or reduced price lunch were lower than parents of children not receiving this economic assistance. Qualitative data revealed impacts on efficacy mirror those proposed by Bandura (1977), including emotional arousal, vicarious experience, encouragement and accomplishment. Recommendations for future research include replication of this study with greater diversity of respondents and translation of the survey into languages other than English. Additionally, future research might include school-based inquiries concerned with general and special educator attitudes towards special education family-school involvement in the current No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability era. Implications for policy and practice are discussed and recommendations are made to school professionals to encourage family-inclusive practices.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the last three decades there have been rapid and fundamental changes in the laws and regulations that govern the referral and placement of children with disabilities in special education. Alongside typical parenting, financial and employment obligations, parents of special needs children have additional concerns in response to their child with disabilities that affect family dynamics and their child's unique educational needs (Simpson, 1988). These parents may feel alienated in the technical and legalistic special education process (Spinelli, 1998). Parents, who possess developmental history information, an understanding of their child's strengths and weaknesses and have their child's best educational interests in mind, are critical participants in this process. Unfortunately, many parents feel they lack the power, knowledge and control to take a more active role (Gerry, 1987). Researchers have documented that approximately 20% of parents do not participate in this process (Katsiyannis & Ward, 1992).

Because the special education referral and placement process includes psycho-educational diagnoses and federal regulations, many parents may feel overwhelmed by the terminology and procedures, and have difficulty speaking up for themselves or what they believe is right for the education of their child. Other parents may withdraw after attempting to be involved, believing their input is not valued, feeling less than satisfied with their child's educational environment or progress, or that there are obstacles to reconsidering the placement (Harry, Allen & McLaughlin, 1995; Howe & Miramontes,

2002). Still other families enlist the power and expertise of educational attorneys and advocates. Families who are aware of their resources may participate in parent support groups, conferences and register with special education resource listservers through their school districts or community agencies.

Parents of children with special educational needs may feel they do not have the necessary information to make their mark on the process (Gerry, 1987; Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980), their opinions are not valued by school personnel (McKinney & Hocutt, 1982; Strickland, 1982), or that they will entrust the future of their child's education to hopefully worthy professionals (Brantlinger, 1987; Strickland, 1982). Parents' feelings of competence in dealing with this system can be understood and explored within the context of Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy. This theory takes a closer look at the determinants for coping with challenging situations. Self-efficacy theory has been used to explore foundations of parenting beliefs, phobias, achievement motivation, counseling expectations, and other areas. Efficacy expectations, a persons' assessment of his/her ability to effect change, will determine how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of aversive experiences (Bandura, 1977). In keeping with Bandura's theory, it would be expected that parents would engage in coping behavior, or a willingness or enthusiasm to approach parent-school involvement, when they feel well equipped with information, and as long as they believe they can be assertive and effect positive change.

Special education laws have come to consider parent involvement as more important over the last few decades and consequent amendments to special education

laws reflect a belief in the significance of the parents' role in this process. Overall, research has shown benefits of parent involvement in the areas of student achievement and positive behavior with all students, not just those with special needs (Comer, 1980; Davies, 1991; Epstein, 1987; Keith, 1993). As laws give more power to parents (e.g., to review records, initiate the process and refute changes, P.L. 94-142, Section 6, and enhanced parent participation in decision-making, Amendments to IDEA, P.L. 105-17, 1997), some parents have become more involved and take on new roles such as advocate and teacher. As researchers have found, many of these parents feel unprepared and uncertain of what is expected of them (Allen & Hudd, 1987). Providing specific educational tools and relevant information to parents of children with disabilities may have a particularly important effect on the successful education of these children. Children with disabilities have a higher incidence of school failure and dropping out: 33-36% compared to the national average of 12-16% (Ferguson & Blumberg, 2001; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2002).

This study investigated parent feelings of navigation efficacy in their involvement in special education. These feelings of efficacy were measured using an investigator-developed assessment tool called the School Navigation Survey (2002). The purpose of this study was to explore parent perceptions of efficacy in their role in the referral and placement process, IEP meetings, home-school relationships and involvement in special education related activities. This study explored differences in perceptions of efficacy among parents from different racial affiliations and educational backgrounds, and with

different rates of IEP meeting attendance. This investigation also assessed the psychometric properties of the exploratory scale.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Special Education Laws and Regulations

Before 1970, many children with special needs and disabilities were deemed 'uneducable'. Special Education laws born in 1970 as a section of civil rights statutes (gleaned from such cases as *Brown vs. the Board of Education)* became more substantial in 1975 with the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), also known as Public Law 94-142 (renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, [IDEA] in 1990). These laws began to define individualized instruction that would accommodate children with special needs and cognitive or developmental delays (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. sec 1400; 34 CFR section 300; Murdick, Gartin, & Crabtree, 2002; Turnbull, 1990; Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, Smith, & Leal, 2002). What became common nomenclature to policy-makers, school personnel, regular education teachers and some parents were the new standards that all students deserve a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), and more specifically, a Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) in which to learn (EAHCA, Public Law 94-142 S.6; Data Research Inc., 1992; Murdick et al., 2002; Turnbull, 1990; Yell, 1995).

There are six principles in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These include the following: Zero Reject, Impartial Assessment, Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), Due Process, and Parent/Student Participation (Turnbull et al., 2002). These mandates came to

represent the overarching themes of special education laws that were intended to level the playing field for students with disabilities in public schools.

The Zero Reject policy is the basis of the law to educate *all* children. No child can be excluded from an *appropriate* public education, regardless of the severity of his or her disability. Impartial Assessment refers to the nondiscriminatory basis of the evaluation of a child's disability. The gathering of critical information about what services a child needs requires sensitivity to his or her primary language, and to his or her cultural background and knowledge. The law regarding the concept of FAPE, a child's access to a Free and Appropriate Public Education, concerns the entitlement of a child to receive services and accommodations (in general or special education classrooms, or in community agencies) that match his or her disability, as laid out in his or her Individualized Education Program.

If a child is in need of specialized instruction in reading in order to be on the same approximate level as his or her peers, he or she is entitled to that instruction at the expense of the Department of Education, or in effect, American taxpayers. Similarly, under P.L. 94-142, if a child is identified in Early Intervention (between ages 0- 5) as needing assistance due to a significant functional impairment or developmental or cognitive delay, he or she is entitled to family services and schooling that matches his or her developmental, social and cognitive needs at public expense. Least Restrictive Environment refers to the allowance of a child to capitalize on the normalcy of the most 'mainstreamed' or 'inclusive' educational setting in which he or she is capable of being successful. It has been determined inappropriate to put otherwise cognitively capable

children with disabilities in a separate and exclusionary setting (Margolis & Tewel, 1990; Pacer Center Inc, 2000).

Grass roots activism and parent and professional advocacy often generated landmark class action lawsuits. Their outcome paved the way for current mandates, such as equal access to public programs and consumer protections based on procedural safeguards. For example, equal protection under civil rights laws as it relates to educational opportunity was based on cases like *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children vs. the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1972)* and *Mills vs. the Board of Education (1972)* (Turnbull et al., 2002). These cases set precedents in the law for "suitable and publicly supported education" (Herr, 1999, p. 349)—a free and appropriate education— for all children.

The laws regarding assessment and placement of a child with a disability in the Least Restrictive Environment have been controversial (Turnbull, 1990). It can be difficult for all parties to agree to what is most *appropriate* for a child. The word itself is open to interpretation. The Benefit Rule (Turnbull et al., 2002), which states that a child must make *real* progress in his or her educational setting, is the standard against which people judge the appropriateness of the Least Restrictive Environment (general LRE requirements include that schools will, to the maximum extent appropriate, include children with disabilities in educational settings with children who do not have disabilities, *§300.550- 300.554).* Another facet of LRE is the determination that children should not be segregated from other typically developing learners if they are able to maximize their social and academic potential in a general education setting with

instructional or environmental modifications. When schools fall short, or when parents or guardians feel schools have fallen short, of adherence to the first four principles (zero reject, FAPE, LRE and an impartial assessment), parents are entitled to Due Process: the ability to raise grievances against the school and have them heard by an impartial hearing officer. Instead of going straight to a due process hearing, many school personnel and parents agree to have their disputes heard by mediators, and this has been successful in 75% of due process cases according to one report in Massachusetts (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Improvements to IDEA have added the mandate of an alternative resolution session prior to due process hearings (IDEA, 2004). Finally, IDEA has specified entitlements to parents and students in their involvement in the special education referral and placement process. This attempts to ensure parent involvement and congruence with the law.

In his article on the legal foundation of special education, Herr (1999) stated the "value of special education laws are only assured if the implementation is conscientious and complete" (p. 351). Herr went on to say that often the terminology and procedural requirements are misinterpreted or inconsistently applied. Some of these misinterpretations come in the form of arbitrary criteria for identification, and the assessment and diagnoses of students with disabilities, which can lead to discrimination that exists in the over-identification of minorities and boys with disabilities (Herr, 1999; National Research Council, 2002; Public Policy Research Institute, 2003).

Though special education regulations are changing, for many states the main diagnostic criterion for eligibility for special education services as a student with a

learning disability is a discrepancy between achievement and intelligence tests, and this is a highly controversial issue. Many researchers believe these intelligence and achievement tests are culturally biased (Harry & Anderson, 1999; Herr, 1999). Herr (1999) also asserted that the timing is not strategic because these discrepancies often come into play too late in the development of a successful student. Children who are administered culturally biased tests and tests administered in languages other than their first inevitably do poorly, and children identified at eight or nine years old have already lost formative years of school learning and will continue to lag behind peers (Herr, 1999).

Herr (1999) addressed additional issues that add to the complexity of the special education referral, assessment and placement process. There are tensions that exist between school personnel (including general education teachers who want to remove a problem learner from their classroom), 'cross-pressures' between federal, district and individual school site policies and poorly articulated connections between different professional personnel working directly with children with disabilities and their families. There are also differing desires and expectations that can lead to conflict between parents and school personnel. In working to make schools more responsive to families with children with disabilities, Herr (1999) recommended the advancement of several strategies that urge social change: an increase in fairness of identification and assessment of all students with disabilities, the improvement and individualization of all educational instruction, and an increase in parent and child participation in educational decision-making.

When asked to characterize the manner in which decisions about students with special needs are made in the schools, a study surveying special education directors across the country found considerable variations in descriptions (Poland, Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Mirkin, 1982). The decision making process is supposed to be streamlined, standardized and designed to ensure that students in need of special services are appropriately identified and accommodated. Special education was based on the principle that all students deserve access to an education that will equalize and maximize opportunities for them to reach their full potential. Special education was not intended to be a dumping ground or catchall for children who are 'difficult to teach' (Reynolds & Dietrich, 1971), or more pertinently now, a placement for students who may bring school high stakes accountability scores down (National Council on Disabilities, 2004).

The variations of diagnostic criterion that exist from state to state result in the inconsistent compliance with the mandate of Child Find and the zero reject policy (Turnbull et al., 2002). The successful implementation of *education for all* means that schools must be responsive to their community of individuals (Davies, 1999; Herr, 1999). In Lake and Billingsley's (2000) study on special education and parent-school conflict, one parent said:

> It also can be very disappointing and a big let down when you realize the limitations of the public school system. It's more disappointing than learning about the limitations of your child. When your child is diagnosed with special needs, or whatever, you know, you go through a grief process. Well, you also go through a grief process when you realize the special education system has a disorder (p. 247).

Parent-School Involvement and Characteristics of Involved Parents

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) found that school-involved parents typically have three characteristics in common. First, involved parents tended to have clear role construction. They have an idea about how they want to be involved with their child's education and refer to their beliefs about the value of education, childrearing and development to construct this idea. Moreover, they use their beliefs about their child's potential educational outcome and their time and environmental constraints to guide their school involvement.

Second, educationally involved parents reported being more inclined to experience feelings of efficacy with their child's academic subject matter and when interacting with school personnel (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). This sense of efficacy was connected to parent beliefs that they were able to exert control, act competently and effect positive change with regard to their child's education. This perception of efficacy is also connected to parent beliefs about school success and intelligence. If parents feel they can exercise control over difficult tasks or events, they are less likely to avoid them and will exhibit higher motivation and persistence (Bandura, 1977). Others have corroborated that parent beliefs or perceptions about schools and their own abilities mediate their involvement in their child's education (Grossman, Osterman, & Schmelkin, 1999; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997).

Finally, involved parents expressed feeling invited to become involved at their child's school. School-involved parents perceived their child's school as welcoming and proactive (e.g., not calling families only when problems arise). These schools encouraged

meaningful participation of parents in supporting school activities, volunteerism, conferences and school policy decision-making (Eccles & Harold, 1996). A study by Eccles and Harold (1996) found that teacher attitudes towards parent involvement had a strong influence on parent involvement. Parents whose children had teachers that encouraged parent involvement tended to report more positive interactions with their child's school. According to Dunst, Trivette and Deal (1994), key principles in the attempt to empower families included helping parents develop feelings of control and competency in school involvement. Families responded positively to school personnel that offered help and resources rather than waiting for a parent request (Summers & Jenkins, 2001).

In their review of the literature, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) elucidated findings that underlie a child's potential educational outcome. The study found that child achievement was based on the values held by parents about education. Lower achievement was linked to parents who focused on teaching their children obedience and conformity, and higher levels of achievement were linked to an emphasis on independent thinking, personal responsibility and creativity.

Evolution of Family-School Involvement and Current Characteristics

Joyce Epstein (1987) constructed three categories of family-school relations: those individuals or communities that see the responsibilities of the family and the school as separate and individual (some incompatibility or conflict), those that emphasize shared responsibilities (coordinate) and those that emphasize sequential responsibilities (change

over time and over the course of child development). Epstein (1987) determined that three factors play a role in these relationships: family considerations (time availability, era and norms, child age, and parent experience), the responsibilities that families and schools feel towards one another, and the pressures one might exert on the other to coordinate. Two *types* of interactions were determined to occur with regard to families and education. One is within organization interaction; these interactions occur within the family organization (e.g., families doing homework together) and within the school organization (e.g., meetings about school policies). The other is the interaction that occurs between organizations, when the systems of family and school interact. There are also two *levels* of interactions. There is an organizational level of families interacting with schools (e.g., back to school night), and an individual level (e.g., a conference between a parent and a school professional). These categories are important when taking into account all of the various people and activity coordinates that combine and interact as part of school systems (Epstein, 1987).

Epstein (1987) determined there are 'family-like schools' and 'school-like families'. School-like families are families in which there are consistent opportunities for academic learning for children. These homes reward success similar to the way it is done in schools, by recognizing when something is done correctly. On the flipside, family-like schools are places where personal relationships between students and teachers are free to develop, uniqueness is given special attention and there is a de-standardization of rules. In family-like schools, variations of student roles and rewards are responsive to individuals. The strength of the overlap between the two institutions and a blurring of

normed roles provide foundations for stronger communities. Teachers and administrators are thought to have the power to encourage or discourage the overlap (Epstein, 1987). Schools, and more specifically teachers, have an important role in determining levels of parent involvement (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 2001; Sheldon, 2003).

The power of the teacher is clear within the special education sphere as well. Blazer (1999) stated that ultimately the provision of classroom accommodations for students with special needs is in the hands of the teacher. This important point does not always take into consideration that teacher philosophies of intelligence and inclusion, behavioral modification skills, and values of diversity are as variable as people's beliefs about politics, religion and childrearing. In the end, it is one (or two) individual(s) in the front of the room that make the effort to implement the Individual Education Program (IEP) goals that keep the special education students on track with their yearly progress.

Where once the school was responsible for overseeing academic development and the home was responsible for moral, cultural and religious education, this line has become blurred. Epstein (2001) identified six types of parent involvement in schools that reflect changes in schools and society. These roles included parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community. According to these categories, schools participating in comprehensive programming for parents helped families establish supportive home environments, developed two-way communication and organized parent help within schools. They also provided families with information and strategies for helping students with their academic work at home,

had parents serving as school leaders, and identified and involved community resources to bolster parent involvement and overall school programming.

Parent involvement in special education is unique. Parents must provide consent to have their child evaluated and they meet with groups of school personnel. Parents are flooded with acronyms for service programs, forms, evaluation tools and behavioral interventions. Parents are presented with a great deal of information about their child's disability, educational accommodations and modifications, and IEP goals.

Gordon and Miller (2003) developed a grouping system for levels of parent involvement specific to special education. The range included non-participant, novice, naïve, intermediate and expert participant. Gordon and Miller (2003) established rubric for the types of skills represented at each level. Parent placement into a category was based on their expression of knowledge (from vague to specific) of child needs, progress, strengths and weaknesses, IEP goals, programming and desired (behavioral, cognitive or emotional) child outcomes. Their analysis of 83 parent interviews revealed several participants were considered non-participants due to a lack of awareness of their child's special education status, but most of their participants fell in the novice to naïve range (70%). Nearly 20% of participants were categorized in the intermediate range and none of the participants were considered expert based on their criterion.

Researchers have found varied levels of parent involvement in the special education process, though participation has increased since the inception of IDEA. Singer and Butler (1987) investigated annual IEP meetings of five cities and found parent participation in meetings ranged from 32% to 95%. Attendance rates were noted to drop

off by approximately 30% for parents involved in the third year of Harry et al.'s (1995) study of African American families. Katsiyannis and Ward (1992) found the IEP meeting attendance rate averaged 80% for parents in their five-year study. A more recent finding indicated 88% of parents with students in special education involved in the National Longitudinal Transition Study reported attending an IEP meeting in the current or prior year (Newman, 2005).

Cultural Issues in Classification and Parent-School and Special Education Involvement

After the implementation of IDEA, patterns of discrimination emerged that were of great concern to parents and professionals. According to Ladner (2003), a growing body of research showed that race played a primary role in determining whether a public school labeled a child as having a disability. Policies such as testing children in their native language have been put in place in an attempt to guard against misdiagnosis, but the disproportionate number of minorities in special education provides overwhelming evidence of mislabeling (Harry & Anderson, 1999; NRC, 2002; PPRI, 2003). Research has also led to some understanding about the nature and etiology of the disproportion; while parent referrals of their children for special services are similar to population statistics, teachers are referring minority children for an evaluation of a learning disability at a much higher rate (NELS, 1988). Identification of severe (observable) disabilities does not have the same disproportion across ethnicities (NRC, 2002).

Ladner (2003) and others (Harry, 1992) have called the mislabeling of minorities evidence of a teaching deficiency or 'miseducation', a lack of equitable access to quality

instruction. Misidentifications that are actually teaching deficiencies and not learning disabilities can lead these students to have a misperception about their abilities (Ladner, 2003). Additionally, insufficient early instruction and unfair assessment procedures can lead to poor educational and life opportunity outcomes for mislabeled students. Some parents are now skeptical that their child is in need of special education services when the symptoms may actually mask a lack of quality, and difference-friendly, instruction. Students mislabeled with mental health disorders may reap many future consequences in self-perception and perceptions of family, peers, and friends as well as future teachers and employers (Ladner, 2003).

In their continuing campaign to advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities, Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, and Park (2003) addressed the idea that the education provided to students with disabilities today will impact their long term perceptions of themselves and their quality of life. Decisions made that place these students in the lowest denominator environments will affect their future rights, ability to self-determine, employment and educational opportunities. Their physical and emotional well being, personal development and interpersonal relationships will also be affected. The philosophical foundation from which LRE and FAPE originates rest on the idea that we all have the right to opportunities that will allow us to reach our self-determined potentials. Turnbull et al. (2003) proposed that IDEA outcomes are directly linked to outcomes affecting a persons' quality of life.

According to Harry (1992), special education classifications are based on a deficit model and emphasize a lack of development in certain areas. In fact, the general

orientation of the special education system is the prevention of failure, as the 'educational need' students must present in order to get services for disabilities is often measured by school failure. Current perceptions of cultural differences in parent-school involvement exist on foundations laid by a majority cultural value system. It is important to consider the cultural differences in conceptualizations of child development, child rearing and school involvement. Culturally diverse families' beliefs about development may range and may not align with narrow school expectations. School personnel may believe a child needs services while their parents do not.

In her evaluation of the foundations of the pathological model of disability, use of technical jargon and class structures, Harry (1992) argued the power differential between parents and schools sets parents up for exclusion or passivity from the outset of the process. Others have noted this discrepancy (Howe & Miramontes, 2002). Though families may attend meetings, they are often minimally involved in the assessment and decision-making processes. Harry (1992) and Inger (1992) argued that parents of minority students are an untapped resource as experts on their children. Harry (1992) encouraged parent involvement in school policy decision-making and the use of a structured interview as a way to include parents in the assessment of their children. This offers professionals insight into the child's difficulties, and their family and developmental history, and provides parents the opportunity to communicate with professionals as an expert. Parents may be more apt to contribute when they feel they are invested in (Mapp, 2002) and received from their familial or cultural vantage point (Harry, 1992). This is also a way for families to hear how the students' difficulties might

be present at school and may give parents an investment in collaborating in the process. Though federal mandates in PL 94-142 included parents in decision-making partnerships, some individual schools may push parents away from authentic involvement.

Kalyanpur, Harry, and Skrtic (2000) stated it is an assumption that parents have access to the same knowledge and information as professionals, a shared understanding of the values underlying 'middle-class advocacy' for their child, and the ability to redress grievances. Forgone conclusions, framed as 'expertism' by Kalyanpur and colleagues (2000), exist in the law and everyday practices of schools. The very idea of advocacy assumes a parent has the ability to know what professionals know.

Uninvolved parents of minority students have been perceived to be apathetic by school officials. Tense or thwarted initial attempts at involvement for parents with different cultural values than school personnel, have alienated many families. What school personnel have perceived as apathy and a lack of involvement has often been withdrawal and a growing sense of mistrust by these parents in the education system (Harry, 1992). Other findings about school involvement for low-income or racial minority parents include logistical (transportation, convenient meeting times) and attitudinal barriers (Mathews, 1998; Sosa, 1997), and a lack of knowledge about rights and procedures (Cassidy, 1988). Technical terms and what are perceived to be negatively stigmatized classifications for their children (labeling) create barriers to communication between school personnel and families, and represent a value chasm (Harry et al., 1995; Mehan, Hartwick, & Meihls, 1986). The beliefs of less educated families about education

may include that the responsibility of teaching their child to read and write lies with the school (Harry, 1992).

There is evidence that racially and economically diverse families are both over and under served by special education (Zhang & Bennett, 2003). Coming from a diverse background is a determinant for under-use of early intervention special education services for children under the age of five (Arcia, Keyes, Gallagher, & Herick, 1993; Sontag & Schacht, 1993, as cited in Harry, 2002) and a predictor of later over-use or overrepresentation (in certain disability categories) during school age years (Harry & Anderson, 1999; NRC, 2002; PPRI, 2003). The mission of schools should be to receive parents from the 'posture of cultural reciprocity' (Harry, Kalyanpur & Day, 1999) and to deliver important (culturally and linguistically appropriate) information that can genuinely help parents in their ability to participate in their child's education and get appropriate services in the case of early intervention. Cultural factors are an important part of the education process and parent involvement. These factors influence coping strategies, help families interpret the nature of disability and their role in school involvement, and impact the resources these families choose to mobilize. Overall, children from diverse backgrounds perform better in school when parents and professionals collaborate to bridge the gap between the culture of the learning institution and the culture of the home (National PTA, 2003). Understanding the home culture of a student or family may clarify why some parents do not feel comfortable questioning professional judgment or asserting opinions in meetings (Blanche, 1996) but this should not be perceived as a lack of interest or engagement (Shu-Minutoli, 1995).

In one study, a significant relationship was found between parent-school involvement of minority students and school attendance (Alvarez-Salvat, 2002). McNeal (1999) found that parent-school communication practices vary by race and income level, and suggested that some groups feel more comfortable in schools and communicating with educators. Another study which surveyed 500 parents, looked at a number of factors and found no differences between cultures for parent-school communication and parent-school involvement time allocation (Ritblatt, 2002), but did reveal parent feelings of school familiarity differed across cultures. Other studies have found parents of different educational, economic and racial backgrounds have similar perspectives on and desires for parent-school involvement, but actual involvement levels were lower among minority parents, and parents with lower income levels and less education (Mathews, 1998; Wood & Baker). Parent involvement has been associated with student achievement and less defiant behavior (McNeal, 1999). This finding intimates that each school should put forth efforts to respond to their community in culturally responsive ways to support multiple beneficial outcomes. With an emphasis on cultural responsiveness towards parents in family-school involvement, Goodwin and King (2002) sought to clarify that parent-school involvement does not always look the same across families, communities and cultures. In order to be culturally responsive to families, schools need to invest in appropriate assessment practices, recruit cultural brokers for effective community outreach and consider parents' needs in determining community responsive programming.

While the need for accuracy is great, researchers have found that schools can overestimate their ability to assess students and many, particularly those in the middle levels of ability, are misassigned (Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1999). Of students in a minority sample who believed they were on a college track, over half were not in the right courses (Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1999). Of students who were able to demonstrate the ability to go on to a four-year college by scoring in the top half of the nation on an eighth grade math achievement test, only 13% were accurately placed in college track classes in their high schools. Dornbusch and Glasgow (1999) stated "if these proportions of misassigned students are even close to the national proportions, millions of talented students in every ethnic group are being shortchanged" (p. 40).

Given the diversity of families utilizing the services rendered by IDEA, meaningful implementation of a culturally responsive and family-centered approach is important. Discrepancies between school personnel, and family and community expectations and values, can result in cultural conflicts that impede the ability of both groups to work together to serve the best interests of the child (Garcia, Mendez-Perez, & Ortiz, 2000). Development and learning need to be considered in cultural and linguistic contexts. Vygotsky's view of disabilities (Garcia et al., 2000) rejected the idea that a child with a disability is *less* developed than his or her peers. Using Vygotsky's socio-constructive orientation, negative perceptions (deficit thinking) detract from the capacity to look at and understand the perspective that a wide range of human diversity exists within and across conditions of learning (Garcia et al., 2000). Expectations about child

functioning exist in cultural contexts and our parameters for human development may in fact be broader or more complex than are defined and supported by IDEA (Harry, 1992).

Parents of children in our public schools come from a variety of cultural backgrounds, some of which may stigmatize special education and students with psychological, educational or developmental disabilities. Professionals need to be aware of and sensitive to potential defensiveness (Faerstein, 1986) and resistance to assistance (Salend & Taylor, 1993) by parents of children with disabilities. For many school professionals, it is imperative to guide families on service delivery, train on participation in the process and implementation of goals, and mutually develop expectations of all parties for involvement. It is also vital that school professionals make the process as family-centered (with respect to cultural and linguistic traditions and goals) as possible (Garcia et al., 2000).

This study primarily looked at the effects of racial affiliation, educational attainment and IEP meeting attendance on feelings of efficacy. However, many of the problems parents face in the special education process transcend these factors. Given the technical and legal foundations of the assessment and placement process, as well as the complexity and sensitive nature of the issues involved including parents' beliefs about their child's disability, parent-school value conflicts and communication styles, difficulties in this process may go beyond issues of parent education and culture.

Influences On and Outcomes of Family-School Involvement

Many researchers (Comer, 1980; Lareau, 1987; Davies, 1999) have identified changes in family structure and society that have led to both positive and negative impacts on social and educational policy. Changes in families and society include: nuclear to single parent and alternative families, and low mother education and employment 30-50 years ago, to high mother education and 70% dual incomes today (Census, 2000). An increasing gap between lower and middle class families and the increase of unwed and teen mothers have also been noted (Comer, 1980; Davies, 1999; Epstein, 1996; Fine, 1989). Changes in families and society have had a detrimental effect on parent-school involvement. As one researcher (Lynn, 1994) noted in a paper for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, families are very busy and "while parent involvement has steadily won new support among educators during the past ten years, parents have gotten harder to reach" (p. 3). However, we have come a long way since parents were seen as the cause of their child's disability (Muscott, 2002; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997).

Epstein (1996) and Davies (1999) identified basic obligations of effective family-school collaborations. As well as working with children at home, opportunities are needed for families to become involved at school, including in school policy decision-making. Schools need to bolster home-school communication and provide ongoing dissemination of information and training to parents. Districts need to make policies and school expectations clear to their communities. While research has addressed the ideal collaboration between families, schools and community agencies, as it stands, many

policies focus on a few target populations within the school, or only on limited types of collaboration (Davies, 1999).

While parent involvement is defined by many to include the various ways parents are involved with their child's education, most agree that the different forms of involvement fall under two headings: at-school involvement and at-home involvement. At-school involvement includes PTA meetings, parent teacher conferences, school events and volunteering. At-home involvement includes homework help and reviewing school to home communication (Epstein, 1987, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

While many researchers are happy to move forward with the conclusion that parent-school involvement is a good thing, others have some difficulty creating increased expectations on families in our society and have stated that parents should not feel forced to do more than they feel they can. Additionally, directives from schools to parents have different meanings for different families and presume an understanding and a consensus of each person's role (Lareau, 1996). There are also those that believe we are trying to professionalize parents as educators and advocates (Allen & Stefanowski-Hudd, 1987).

Educational experiences affect a child's well being, quality of life and opportunities (Altshuler & Kopels, 2003). Parent involvement in those educational experiences can decrease dropping out, boost student attendance, eliminate educators' false assumptions about parents and parent involvement, enhance a parent's ability to serve as a resource to their child and increase parent confidence (Bonilla, 1998, Cotton & Wikelund, 1989). As the benefits of parent involvement in education continue to be identified, the key word is *responsive*. As one researcher pointed out, parents should be

as involved in the IEP process as they want to and can be (Morgan, 1982). Some researchers have been determined to empower parents to become active partners in all stages of the process, from assisting school personnel in information gathering and areas of assessment, to implementation of activities in the home towards learning goals on their child's IEP (Gilliam & Coleman, 1981; McLoughlin, Edge & Strenecky, 1978).

Parent training can include a continuum of services from school personnel. Of primary importance, parents need written information about their child's disability and the process they will be involved with in order to get their child services through special education. This information includes statements of parent procedural safeguards, information about IEP goals and disability information. The recent TEA (2004) parent survey noted that 13% to 29% of parents reported they did not receive some of this important information. Additionally, if a parent has a low level of literacy it is critical that school personnel use layperson language (and translators if needed) to ensure parent understanding of the basics of the special education procedures and child's disability. Training in response to parent need for information and understanding of the special education process should be short but comprehensive, while giving parents resources for further information (Wood & Baker, 1999). Training should also include information about what might be asked of parents, information about disabilities (case specific), and special education laws, rights and procedures. Researchers have discussed low participation and completion levels of parent training (Holden, Lavigne, & Cameron, 1990), though this type of training has been seen to promote parent advocacy and parent-school communication skills (Jacobson, Huffinan, Rositas, & de Corredor, 1997).

Studies have established mixed evidence of parent desire for training in special education. Only 10% of parents of children with learning disabilities in Simpson's (1988) study reported wanting training in the area of special education or IEP involvement, yet higher percentages of teachers (67%) desired parent training for these families. In one study researchers found 80% of families wanted reading materials and between 50% and 60% (depending on topic) wanted parent training (Dembinski & Mauser, 1977). In another study, 76% of parents said they wanted more involvement in their child's education, 45% wanted more written resources to refer to and 33% asked for more parent training (Kunesh & Rose, 1990).

It is important to develop more inclusive roles for culturally and linguistically diverse families in the special education assessment process (Harry, 1992). With this goal in mind, families should be interviewed about their child's abilities and behavior at home and in other after-school activities. Giving parents the opportunity to provide authentic input may help both parties pursue a partnership in the process.

Parent coordinators or liaisons and parent centers (within districts or schools) are also considered a solution to the parent involvement question (Goodwin & King, 2002; Kroth & Otteni, 1983). Many districts have gathered the financial resources necessary to fund part time and full time positions throughout the school year. One example is the Round Rock Independent School District (RRISD) Special Education Parent Liaison Program. RRISD is located north of Austin, Texas. RRISD distributes a special education newsletter (in English and Spanish) with information about useful and relevant community resources for families, holds parent-training workshops, collaborates

volunteer parent special education representatives for schools and collects information for a special education resource library (RRISD Parent Liaison Brochure, 2004).

The parent liaison becomes responsive to the distinct needs of the community. Many of the concerns these coordinators face are concerns of *all* parents overseeing their child's education, though many issues are magnified for parents of children with learning and educational obstacles. The Parent Empowerment Project, a parent support, involvement and training program in San Francisco (evaluated for years 1987-1991) found that 65% of parents believed their child's school performance improved since the project's implementation, 89% believed their communication with the school had improved, and general attendance and grades improved for 80% of participating children (Romines, 1992). Activities for this parent program included operating 23 Spanish and 16 English school related parent support groups, training 93 parents to help in family math and science groups (approximately 20 groups were held during the five years studied), and training parents to get involved in the school as tobacco prevention specialists and parent liaisons.

Researchers have determined the importance of parent involvement on children's educational achievement (Comer, 1980; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1996; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Keith, 1993; Loucks, 1992; Sheldon, 2003). Research has also concluded that early school success, including literacy and social skills, has also been associated with parent involvement (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Culturally and community responsive (Goodwin & King 2002), as well as age appropriate parent involvement, is important throughout a child's educational career (National PTA Brief, 2004).

Additionally, efforts towards parent inclusion by teachers have been found to be more important than parent background (Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999).

Many researchers have identified the variety of reasons parents seem less likely to get involved. These included time and employment constraints, parent resources, beliefs about education and their role in school involvement, and a lack of feelings of efficacy or perceived invitation (Coots, 1998; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Lareau, 1987; Sosa, 1997). Researchers have also tried to explore parent involvement and discrimination related to parent socio-economic status. When socio-economic status (SES) was controlled, enthusiasm and positive parenting style were found to correlate with child achievement, and were predictors of parent-school involvement (Zellman & Waterman, 1998). Other parenting styles found to be associated with parent-school involvement include enrichment and academic activities in the home, and communicating the value of education (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Lareau (1987) found that school personnel mistakenly equate active parent participation or involvement with the value the family places on education, instead of the multitude of other economic, familial, time, and social and cultural factors that could impact their decision. Other types of parenting styles and home educational practices examined in the research include the accessibility of home literacy materials (Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991), support and supervision (Kurdick, Fine & Sinclair, 1995*)* and emphasizing child effort over ability (Stevenson, 1983).

Multiple factors have been found to influence educational involvement including parent, child and school characteristics (Coots, 1998; Davies, 1991; Eccles & Harold,

1996; Epstein, 1996). The most important student characteristic that plays a role in family-school involvement is developmental stage. Research has concluded that there is a decline in parent involvement over the course of a child's educational career, as parents and schools try to instill more personal responsibility and independence on students as they approach high school (Conners & Epstein, 1994; Cotton & Wikelund, 1989; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1987; Hill & Taylor, 2004; National PTA Brief, 2004; Skinner, 2004).

A characteristic that plays a role in family-school involvement for teachers is their disposition towards parent involvement. Many teachers say they would like to see more parent involvement, but in an anonymous poll done by Dornbusch and Glasgow (1996), the majority of teachers wanted to hold parents at bay. For many teachers encouraging the inclusion of parents is energy and time consuming. Teachers do not necessarily have training in working with parents, tend to see involving parents as extra work not built into their schedule and feel they do not get compensated well enough to expand their job to serve families as well as children. This possible predisposition against involving parents is critical information, as researchers have come to believe that teachers often hold the power to include or exclude families in education (Davies, 1999; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1987; Sheldon, 2003).

There may be conflicts between parent ability and desire to become an active participant, and teacher ambivalence to place parents in the role of collaborator or expert. This is an era where the expectations for parent involvement are written into law but the foundation for their authentic and actual involvement is still not fully realized. Invitation,

atmosphere, and encouragement are main school characteristics that impact parent-school involvement. Out of ten schools in America, only one school is doing more than the traditional parent-teacher conferences, open house night, performances or sporting events, fairs and school to home communication (report cards and discipline referrals) (Davies, 1996). Another report claims between 50% and 70% of teachers do not provide families with any more evaluative information about their child's performance than standard report cards (Eccles & Harold, 1994, as cited in, Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1996). As part of an expansive vision and ecological model of the education of all children, the responsibility should be on schools to enhance, develop and honor family participation (Turnbull & Vohs, 1994).

Beginning with revolutionaries in sociology and education like Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot and James Comer, scholars have tried to illuminate the changes needed to how parent involvement in education is conceptualized in our society. Scholars in education reform have focused on the need to reduce negative impacts of socio-economic status and to develop suitable instruction for different types of learners. In their attempt to evaluate the system they proposed solutions such as restoring power and authority to schools as important governing bodies (Comer, 1980), and providing an equitable playing field across racial and economic boundaries to help bridge the disconnect between homes and schools (Lightfoot, 1978).

According to the National Research Council (2002), students from households where the annual income level is less than $25,000 were two times more likely than higher socio-economic status peers to be receiving special education services. Another

source stated that 47% of youth being served as students with disabilities come from low-income homes (Ferguson & Blumberg, 2001). While students from higher annual income families made up 36% of students in the general population they were only 15.4 % of the population of students with disabilities (National Research Council, 2002). In an examination of data collected by the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS, 1988), it was concluded that socio-economic status played a role in teacher identification and referral of students thought to have learning disabilities.

In an attempt to map the influences on and potential consequences of parent involvement in schools, Eccles and Harold (1996) found influences on involvement included parent, family, culture, child, teacher and school characteristics. Potential outcomes of positive steps in the direction of collaboration include strategic and active parent involvement, feelings of efficacy for parents and teachers, and improved child educational values, goals and feelings of efficacy in school. Eccles and Harold (1996) proposed that two aspects of school systems influence parent involvement, the physical organization of the schools and the attitudes of school personnel. They described personnel attitudes as ranging from inhibiting and discouraging to facilitating and encouraging school involvement. Characteristics they identified as likely to enhance parent-school involvement among personnel included clear ideas about how to effectively involve parents (at school and at home), beliefs that they will be successful in doing so, training on how to effectively involve parents and feeling supported in doing so.

There are many benefits to the involvement of parents in the IEP process. Parents are able to provide observational information, and family and developmental histories.

In-depth interviews increase teacher and school personnel holistic understanding of the student in various contexts. Teacher education to families about the child's curricula and accommodations adds to the parent knowledge of their child's educational setting and informs them about ways to supplement that work in the home.

Two-way communication improves relationships between parties and increases the likelihood of mutually agreed upon goals (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). There are many obstacles that prevent this involvement from taking place including law and education related jargon, parent lack of understanding of the school system, parent feelings of inferiority, school professionals' lack of understanding and consideration for the child or family's cultural context, and logistical barriers (Reglin, King, Losike-Sedimo, & Ketterer, 2003). Other issues have been identified including the functionality of decision-making teams, teacher training and lack of funds or space to implement family collaboration (Poland et al., 1982).

Policy Changes in Parent-School Involvement

An increase in the weight of consideration towards parents in educational decision-making has a rich recent history, culminating in commission reports and mandates in federal law including IDEA and the 1997 Amendments to IDEA, Goals 2000, The Presidents Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) and most recently, the improvements to IDEA (2004). As many researchers have discussed, these works have brought increased attention to what is being done in schools to actively encourage parent-school involvement. The legislative bodies that have developed these

regulations and reports recognize the valuable role parents play, however, information leading to practice promoting the full inclusion of parents and students in educational and transitional service decision making is still lacking.

In an amendment to acts that financially support the education of students with disabilities, Title One (which promotes educational equity to financially disadvantaged schools) has required schools to initiate a written policy on parent-school involvement practices in order to receive this funding. Additionally, some districts have mandated the initiation of parent-teacher associations for special education parents and personnel. According to Davies (1999), few districts and schools have these written policies, or if they do, they are typically vague and make general statements about the importance of parents in education. Amendments to IDEA in 1997 stated there needs to be "enhanced parent participation in eligibility and placement decisions" (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997. 20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq) and students with disabilities need to be included in state and district wide assessment programs (with accommodations as necessary).

This legislation is significant as it affects the stability of students with disabilities in inclusion classes in the current high stakes testing arrangement. Some federal and state goals are in conflict. The 1997 IDEA amendments include greater access to general education classrooms for students with disabilities but No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (the reissued Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965) revitalized pressures for high stakes accountability, and teacher and school performance, and has been pushing

some of those with recent access to general education back out to more restrictive environments (DRA, 2001; NCAC, 2004; Turnbull et al., 2003).

Needs of Parents of Children with Disabilities

In keeping with the procedural safeguards that protect parents rights in public programs set up by IDEA, schools are required to provide parents with written notice requesting, and gain consent to conduct, an evaluation of their child. Parents are entitled to refer their own child for testing, review all school records, know the details of the evaluation and request an independent assessment if they disagree with the school's findings. Finally, they are entitled to request a due process hearing if they are unable to reach an agreement about assessment findings, or placement and other decisions (Advocacy Inc. Parent Manual, 2002; IDEA, 1995; Turnbull et al., 2003).

Importantly and often overlooked, parents are entitled to make *informed* decisions. The onus is on schools to provide information, written resources and education on parent rights and options. Parents with the financial wherewithal or a clear sense of purpose and efficacy, or both, are able to make assertive requests, at times getting schools to agree to their desired educational program. Many families lack the financial resources, persistence, and school and legal navigation skills needed to pursue their rights (Margolis & Tewel, 1990). One study found that affluent parents and parents with higher education levels were more apt, motivated and able to make time to attend school meetings and were less intimidated by schools than less affluent families (Singer & Butler, 1987). This

contrast between behaviors of families from different socio-economic levels indicates a subtle, but very real, form of discrimination may exist.

Researchers have tracked the frequency of speakers in Individualized Education Program multidisciplinary meetings (in Texas, these are known as Admissions, Review and Dismissal [ARD] meetings), topics discussed and primary recipients of comments. Parents were found to be the primary recipients of comments in these meetings yet they were far less likely to speak (Goldstein et al., 1980). Of the 14 multidisciplinary meetings Goldstein et al. (1980) analyzed, only 5 were found to be in full compliance with PL 94-142, in terms of personnel in attendance. Personnel who were not present included representatives of the public agency responsible for supervising delivery of special education, general education teachers (43% attendance rate) and the evaluator (29% attendance rate). Meeting times ranged from 6 to 72 minutes. The most frequent topics of discussion were curriculum, behavior and academic performance. Worthy of note, the only parent who actively participated in educational decision making (including specification of educational objectives) was a father who was also a psychologist. Overall, Goldstein et al. (1980) concluded that the legal rights and responsibilities of parents were glossed over in the majority of these multidisciplinary meetings. In only two of the conferences, facilitators provided parents with written information about their rights.

Findings from this study (Goldstein et al., 1980) included that there was an under-representation of general education teachers in these conferences and the authors propose this may indicate inadequate communication to these teachers about the existence and

need for implementation of goals included in the documents. From this study, recommendations were made to systematically train parents to take a more active role in educational decision-making and for professionals to involve parents as full partners in the process. The need for parents to have a working understanding of the laws and assessment procedures involved, as well as the importance of the parental role in the development of their child's IEP, were underlined in this study (Goldstein et al., 1980).

Bennett and DeLuca (1996) studied the effects of parent support groups, professional help, and family and friend support to parents of students with disabilities. Results concluded that parents want to collaborate with professionals who are open and honest. They were also interested in seeing professionals who admit their limitations, establish a relationship with their child and know current best practices (Bennett & DeLuca, 1996). Kroth and Otteni (1983) developed a Mirror Model of Parent Involvement in which parent needs and strengths are mirrored by recommendations to a district in Arizona. These activities, such as parent counseling and education, parent involvement in assessments, newsletters, home-school communication, parent advisory groups and parent-to-parent programming, continue to be reflected in suggestions made by researchers two decades later.

Parent Stress

Researchers widely acknowledge the additional stress a child with a disability can place on family functioning, parenting and marital relations (Bubolz & Whiren, 1984; Dyson, 1993; Faerstein, 1981; Hadadian, 1994; Longo & Bond, 1984; Mahoney & O'Sullivan, 1992; Schilling, Gilcrest, & Schinke, 1984; Volenski, 1995; Waggoner &

Wilgosh, 1990). In addition, schools play a major role in supporting family functioning by finding, assessing and placing a student with a disability in an appropriate educational environment that will promote their cognitive and social development. Families of children with disabilities need to be trained in coping strategies and how to access social and community support, information and resources (Bubolz & Whiren, 1984; Schilling, Gilchrist & Schinke, 1984). Turnbull, Strickland and Goldstein (1978) argued that in order for parents to take an active role in the referral and placement process, they need to have information about related laws and regulations, an understanding of the procedures and clarity about their role in the process. Other researchers emphasized the need for parents of children with disabilities to gain a greater understanding of their individual child's cognitive, emotional and physical development (Gold & Richmond, 1979).

In appreciation of the stress this process can have on the family system, Bubolz and Whiren (1984) hypothesized that energy can be easily exhausted in trying to identify and accommodate the child with a disability (physically, academically and emotionally) within the home and energy is limited. It is important that families are able to find and use support systems that replenish family energy, whether they are tutors, psychologists, respite care, physicians or other professionals. The ecological model of service delivery Bubolz and Whiren (1984) proposed tightly linked communication and collaboration between public, private and volunteer agencies, which provide health and social services.

A 'cognitive problem-solving model' utilized in a parent training intervention study focused on parents' acceptance of their child's diagnoses, found that parent training procedures (information dissemination, case examples and discussions), reduced negative

emotional arousal through increasing cognitive understanding (Switzer, 1985). Increasing knowledge can allay parent anxiety and teach them to communicate effectively with school personnel (Shapero & Forbes, 1981). One important finding of the impact of arming parents with coping strategies and information about the process is that when parents advocate for their child, their input tends to play a major role in placement decisions (Waggoner & Wligosh, 1990).

Discrepant Agendas & Conflict

Acknowledging the potential for cooperation or antagonism between parties in this process, McLoughlin, Edge and Strenecky (1978) proposed that school professionals need to streamline procedures for the assessment of Learning Disabled children and provide clear diagnostic explanations in conferences with parents. There is a scarcity of research about the parent perspective in the parent-school conflict, but one study implicated a lack of legal information, differing values, knowledge of available services, and trust and communication between parties as components of potential conflict (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). In another study about parents who took schools to due process hearings, researchers found that a better process of communication between the parents and school personnel at an earlier stage might have averted some of the conflicts (Budoff, Orenstein, & Abramson, 1981). Though the rhetoric may state that parents should be *full* partners and schools are mandated to encourage parent involvement, in their actual participation, parents are still commonly made to feel powerless (Fine, 1993).

In their exploration of what parents of children with disabilities want from professionals, Dembinski and Mauser (1977) concluded that parents want professionals

to facilitate comfortable and supportive meetings without the use of professional jargon. Parents included in this study were married (95%) and from suburban and urban areas (73%). These parents wanted professionals to emphasize and prioritize the importance of meeting with both parents (when applicable) and they wanted resource materials they can refer back to so as to understand their child's diagnosis better. Other findings from this study of 234 participants included that parents want advice (i.e. on behavior management), information about how the diagnosis will affect their child socially as well as academically and written reports from professionals. Parents also wanted the different professionals working with their children to be in communication with each other.

A typical reaction of professionals to a parent who challenges the system is to label them in negative terms. Although parents have gained legal access to the process, legislation does not guarantee the quality of collaboration between parents and professionals (Weatherly Valle & Aponte, 2002). However, Epstein discovered that teachers who were more involved with families expressed more positive interactions and stereotyped families less. There can be a disconnect between families and schools that breeds mutual anxiety about what the effort of collaboration will entail (Epstein, 1996).

Providing a parent a, usually dense and technical, procedural safeguards manual may not be perceived as helpful. In the 1997 amendments to IDEA a mandate was added that the language used in delivering information to parents about their child's rights should be in as easily understood language as possible (Overview of 1997 Amendments to IDEA, ERIC E576). This simple mandate is simply not being implemented widely. In central Texas there are a few dominant parent manuals, including local school district

manuals, Advocacy Inc. in conjunction with the ARC of Texas developed a manual, and the Texas Education Agency has their widely distributed parent manual. They range in length from 3 dense pages of 10-point-font (local school district) to 26 pages (TEA). These pamphlets go through many of the laws related to special education and give some definitions of key terminology. Advocacy Inc. distributes a user-friendly parent manual "Still a Good IDEA!" (2002), which includes templates of letters for home-school communication and ways to log communication. This manual is 57 pages and requires certain language abilities, effort and time to understand and utilize. All of these manuals are most easily accessed via the internet, which is not accessible to many low-income families. All three have been translated into Spanish and other frequently requested languages.

McKinney and Hocutt (1982) found that a parents' desire to become more involved with the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process leads to an awareness that the process has to be at least as "people oriented as it is document oriented" (p. 72). Other researchers concur (Harry, et al., 1995). Another key finding illuminated the need for professionals to clearly communicate to parents their educational rights and responsibilities (Kroth, 1989; McKinney & Hocutt, 1982).

An evaluation of parent involvement in seven Midwestern states found that only 50% of parents felt they knew how to work with schools to help educate their child and 76% of parents wanted to be more involved. Findings also indicated that parents wanted more direct training and for schools to encourage information dissemination and parent satisfaction (Kunesh & Rose, 1990). As Faerstein (1981) stated, the way a child with a

disability views themselves is often a reflection of how others respond to them, so the needs of parents of children with disabilities are in fact, the needs of the healthy development of the children with disabilities themselves.

Research investigating levels of parent satisfaction with the special education system has been difficult to accurately interpret, as an understanding of the factors parent use to support their responses has not been well established. When asked about their satisfaction with the process some families respond that they simply felt comfortable and that sufficed for positive identification with the process (Gordon & Miller, 2003). When asked more specifically what went into their determination of satisfaction, many parents do not continue to respond as favorably and inconsistencies arise. Some parents who rated the process positively, later responded that they did not have an opportunity to contribute in the IEP meeting, felt they were there to 'rubber stamp' the document, or (with most IEP's being signed on the same day it is presented to parents) they were not able to fully comprehend the information contained in the document in the time allotted (Gordon & Miller, 2003). This incongruity has made it difficult for researchers to obtain an accurate representation of the experiences of parents in this process (Gordon & Miller, 2003). In their study, Gordon and Miller (2003) found that parent satisfaction and positive feelings towards services were biased in a positive direction and not necessarily linked to objective data. Similarly unsubstantiated responses to specific criterion for satisfaction were noted in Spann, Kohler, & Soenkse's (2003) study on parent involvement in special education and Texas Education Agency's (2004) special education parent satisfaction survey.

Being a professional working within the educational system and having a child with a disability provides significant new insight to what needs to be done to alleviate the navigation challenges for parents (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). That dual role gave a Canadian school principal and father of an autistic child that insight. He reported that navigating the special education system was perplexing and that the school didn't always have his priorities in mind (Tetreau, 1995). This experience allowed Tetreau to see firsthand that parents of children with disabilities need to be properly educated about what actions will take place, their purpose and the role of the parent (Tetreau, 1995).

Dembinski and Mauser (1977) determined that future directions for research need to include professional training for parents about their rights in order to understand and implement the full potential benefit of parent participation in special education. More recently, Volenski (1995) found that the role of parents in the education process requires further assessment, specifically in the area of the IEP development. Instead of waiting for parents to realize the necessity of their role in their child's education, schools need to promote the inclusion of parents and take a proactive stance, instead of being reactive to discipline problems, failing grades or parent requests (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Grossman et al, 1999; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Katsiyannis & Ward, 1992; Kunesh & Rose, 1990; Spinelli, 1998). Simpson (1988) developed a model for the needs of parents of children with disabilities, including the need for greater information exchange, advocacy training, links to community services and parent-coordinated support programs.

In The Dark

As Meyer and Rowan (1977) aptly stated, “school officials and teachers gain from the ignorance of students and their parents” (as cited in Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1999, p. 40). It is, in fact, fiscally and authoritatively functional for schools to leave parents of children with special needs in the dark. However, Singer and Butler (1987) pointed out that informed parent participation is a necessary corrective for potential abuses of power by schools.

A study exploring the amount of information parents of children with disabilities have, found that parents reported a lack of knowledge about their child’s disability. This in turn influenced their decision to avoid school involvement for fear of being blamed as the cause of their child’s disability or perceived by school personnel as ignorant (Mathews, 1998). In particular, low-income parents were found to lack the information necessary to navigate the education system and did not know important relevant terms like ‘due process’, ‘least restrictive environment’ or ‘mainstreaming’ (Brantlinger, 1987). Most parents appeared to go along with the school’s decisions for their children and did not challenge the expertise or agenda of the school (Brantlinger, 1987). According to Lake and Billingsley (2000), due process and resolution meetings are often the result of conflicts about parents misunderstanding of rights, role construction or an inability to judge program quality. Similarly, Simpson (1988) found that parents of special needs children do not recognize their own needs, or know what resources are available to them.

It is assumed that families should have an impact on the process when involved in Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) (20 U.S.C. § 1400, IDEA Part C, for infants and

toddlers). Parents are trained about their child's disability and are included in ECI teams and provided with an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). Service personnel impress upon families the importance of doing active work with their children in the home. Is it then appropriate to assume under IDEA that parents do not need to be instructed on their child's disability and they are unable to make the same impact on their child's educational experience? Since many children receiving services through ECI have more observable difficulties, which are detected earlier, many families are aware that their child needs services. At these early stages of life and development it is imperative to involve primary care givers because the home is the main venue for service delivery. At different developmental stages families and service providers may disagree about the nature and accommodation of the problem.

Texas Education Agency: Survey of Parents of Children with Disabilities

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), the overseeing branch of the Department of Education dedicated to special education, asked the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to undertake recent monitoring tasks. This request from Washington, D.C. initiated a statewide parent involvement in special education evaluation by TEA. The state education agency mailed out 32,000 surveys and over five thousand were returned from parents of students receiving special education services in the state of Texas. The survey was administered during the 2002-03 school year and findings were published in March 2004. Parent respondents were 53.5% Caucasian, 30.7% Hispanic, 12% African American and 3.6% identifying with another racial category. Many of these respondents

had children in special education for 3-5 years (42%) and the highest returns were from parents of children with specific Learning Disabilities (33%), Speech Impairments (17.3%), Other Health Impairments (13.3%), Mental Retardation (10.8%), and Emotional Disturbances (8.4%). Most respondents had only one child in special education (75%) and ninety-percent of respondents had children seven years old and older being served in special education. Among the issues considered were the IEP meeting (or ARD meeting in Texas), satisfaction with educational services and availability of informational resources.

One limitation of this report reflected a shortcoming of this type of research, which is what parents do not know cannot accurately be measured (Gordon & Miller, 2003). Parents do not know what they do not know about special education or programming they are not involved with that may be relevant, beneficial or available to their child. In addition, the survey was relatively short and contained broad questions (e.g., Do you understand the role of the ARD committee? Are you satisfied with the special education services your child is receiving?). However, some findings lend insight that parents are not trained sufficiently to be actively involved and make an impact on the process. Another limitation of TEA's survey was the scale for answers, available responses to a significant portion of the questions, included the broad options of 'completely understand', 'somewhat understand' and 'do not understand'.

Along with the methodological issues of this survey which included subjective interpretation of these broad response categories, the potential for socially desirable responses and self-report, there were additional concerns. Parents who answered

‘completely understand’ were not given an opportunity to demonstrate their breadth of knowledge with specifics and parents who answered ‘somewhat understand’ did not tell us much about what they do and do not understand about the individual questions.

Of the five thousand responses to the TEA survey, almost 13% (650) said they were either unsatisfied or very unsatisfied with the receipt of services for their child in special education. This finding could translate to 58,500 families, which is 13% of the approximately 450,000 children in Texas receiving special education services. However, this survey should be generalized with caution given its methodological questionability.

The TEA survey report also concluded that almost 10% of families did not understand why their child was eligible for special education. Twenty-seven percent of the five thousand families responded that they did not understand the process for referral for special education services and almost the same number (25.5%) of parents did not understand their child’s special education evaluation results. When asked if they knew that special education services are sometimes provided in settings other than public schools, only 43% of parents answered ‘yes’. One in five families did not know that an ARD (IEP) meeting could take place at a mutually agreed upon time and, nearly 20% of parents did not receive any explanation regarding what to expect concerning their child’s IEP meeting.

In terms of more specific knowledge that families might have regarding their child’s educational rights, many families were unaware that special education could take place in a regular education environment and that there is a wide-range of options for the provision of services. Almost 65% of parents were unaware that TEA had a parent

information phone line and nearly half of parent respondents did not know that TEA provided workshops and training about special education. Just over 60% of families did not know how to request a mediation or due process hearing and just under 60% did not know how to file a written complaint to TEA. The more important question (unasked) is not only did they know how, but did they understand it was within their rights. Approximately 70% of families received information about their child's disability from their child's school.

TEA's findings of positive satisfaction (very or somewhat satisfied) with education service provision appeared to be fairly stable across African-American (86.1%), Caucasian (86.5%) and Hispanic (90.2%) parents. But as parents reported higher levels of educational attainment there was a decrease in their satisfaction with the services provided to their children. Almost 30% of parents responded that they felt the ARD committee (multidisciplinary IEP team) did not value their input and only 40% of families believed that their child's IEP modifications were being actively implemented in the classroom. Additionally, TEA had an open-ended item about the needs of parents. Nearly one thousand parents responded to this item. One hundred and sixteen families responded they wanted more information about their rights, school policies and how to file complaints.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Parents of children with disabilities come into a new world of parenting, terminology, services and professional help. They make a lot of decisions and hear a lot

of information. Alongside behavior plans, academic help and the family's orientation towards the child with disabilities, the process of overseeing their child's education (referral and placement meetings and activities) involves stress and can be overwhelming. Parents may feel a sense of incompetence when participating. Parents of children with disabilities going through this process may also make judgments or assumptions about themselves and their ability to cope, speak up for themselves or affect change. These expectations they have about themselves may lead them to avoid or approach special education participation. They may help parents define how much energy, effort and sanity they are willing to expend in the process.

Bandura's (1977) behavioral learning theory of self-efficacy explored how cognitive representations or outcome expectancies of events made by individuals mediate their efforts to employ coping skills needed to work through an event. While some theorists believe efficacy is a trait, Bandura asserted that self-efficacy can be enhanced through informational training and exposure. Bandura explained that the strength of people's convictions in their own effectiveness is likely to affect whether or not they will try to cope with challenging situations. Efficacy expectations are beliefs that an individual has the means (information, understanding, skill, and stamina) to successfully execute required behaviors for success. Experimental research in the area of self-efficacy has demonstrated that if people believe a situation calls for more coping skills than they assess they have, people typically display avoidance. Bandura described the different dimensions of self-efficacy and ways to behaviorally train or encourage feelings of efficacy.

According to Bandura (1977) feelings of efficacy vary on a continuum of magnitude (simplicity vs. difficulty of task), strength (weak vs. strong expectations for mastery), and generality (specific to task vs. more global 'generalizable' beliefs about results). The more positive an individual's assessment of these traits, the stronger his or her efforts will be in persisting through obstacles. Modalities of treatment involve exposing people to avoided stimuli, encouraging feelings of efficacy, attenuating fears, and bolstering positive expectations in the face of difficult events. Bandura developed a four level treatment framework for increasing self-efficacy: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal.

Bandura stated performance accomplishments, also called experiential learning, have the strongest effect on perceptions of efficacy. Vicarious experience, like desensitization can occur through live or symbolic modeling. Bandura's concept of verbal persuasion is akin to coaching and external validation, and the reduction of emotional arousal often leads a person towards greater feelings of efficacy. Bandura held that mastery attained through personal experiences produced the most generalized and enduring changes in behavior. The desired outcome of efficacy training is to reduce negative impacts of failure and increase the ability to cope and perform well in stressful situations.

Efficacy scales on topics related to this study have included parenting and parenting skills (Parent Efficacy Scale, Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992; The Self-Efficacy for Parenting Tasks Index, Coleman & Karraker, 2000), parent beliefs about school personnel and school involvement (Grossman et al., 1999) school program

efficacy (e.g., of a program for students with ADHD, Evans, Axelrod, & Langberg, 2004), and general (and subject specific, e.g., Science Teaching Efficacy Belief Instrument, Riggs & Enochs, 1990) teacher efficacy (Teachers Sense of Self-Efficacy Scale, Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001). There are also studies utilizing interviews about efficacy and special education parent-school involvement (Gordon & Miller, 2003). While Bandura (2005) supports the use of a 0-100 scale for measuring efficacy and evidence from another study supports this claim (Pajares, Hartley, & Valiante, 2001), many measures of efficacy, including Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler's (1997) survey, used a five point Likert scale similar to the one used in the present study.

Self-Efficacy in Parenting and Special Education and School Involvement

Self-efficacy is the feeling or perception that one has the skills necessary (cognitively, physically or emotionally) to produce a desired effect (Bandura, 1977). The navigation of the special education referral and placement process includes numerous policies and procedures. Schools' adhere to federal and state regulations which rapidly change. Professionals can feel swamped with the evolution of terminology, diagnostic criterion, mandates, deadlines and assessment tools. Parents of children with disabilities can feel emotionally and intellectually exhausted and overwhelmed by this process. Parents and professionals have different conclusions about the role of parents in this process and parents are not always well informed about what the process entails. Discrepancies between expectations for efficacy and actual performance on a task are

more likely to arise under conditions in which task requirements are ambiguous (Bandura, 1977).

Effort may be expended over long periods of time when parents are dealing with accepting and understanding the disability, learning about school and special education systems and collaborating with different professionals about their child's academic needs and educational placement. Perceptions of efficacy affect cognitive evaluations of ability and can enhance or depress levels of functioning in these situations. Positive assessments of efficacy are required to maintain a task-oriented focus in the face of threats of failure (Bandura, 1989). The misjudgment or miscalculation of perceived efficacy can be hazardous, a more realistic assessment can be limiting, and slight optimism and risk taking can be helpful in that an inflated sense of efficacy may lower inhibition. Similarly, there exists a cyclical relationship between efficacy and mood; perceptions of efficacy and positive or negative mood affect each other bi-directionally (Bandura, 1989).

According to Coleman and Karraker (1997), there is a potency to efficacy beliefs and they appealed to researchers for more research in this area. Historically, special education reformers have sought to promote parent and student participation and specifically, to increase their sense of efficacy in the process (Herr, 1999). Parent's confidence in their ability to impact their child's academic performance and school experiences, and the importance attached to being involved in their child's schooling, correlated positively with parent involvement both at home and at school (Eccles and Harold, 1996). These self-perceptions affect their school involvement (Hill & Taylor, 2004) and their ability to influence their child's developmental and educational outcomes.

In contrast, an appraisal of low self-efficacy can interfere with highly desirable goals (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). In terms of parenting and perceptions of efficacy, Ardelt and Eccles (2001) found that parents are likely to participate in school related activities if they believe their behavior will have a positive effect on their children. Parents who believe they have little or no control over their child's education are less likely to engage. High levels of efficacy may buffer socio-structural influences; however, low levels of efficacy may exacerbate negative impacts of external demands like employment, childcare and finances. Parents filled with self-doubt regarding their competency are more likely to experience negative emotional reactions (Coleman & Karraker, 1997).

Coleman and Karraker (1997) considered the efficacy estimations parents make about their capacity to deal with demanding parenting tasks. Feelings of efficacy in parenting roles can be a strong indicator of parent functioning. High levels of efficacy may reduce other negative influences on parenting, like financial duress and other stressful or uncontrollable environmental factors, while low levels of efficacy are correlated with feelings of hopelessness, and inhibit skill acquisition and confident performance. A study about efficacy and ideas about parenting indicated that abusive, punitive and depressed mothers tended to report lower levels of self-efficacy and higher levels of self-efficacy were positively correlated with parents' efforts to educate themselves about parenting skills (Coleman & Karraker, 1997). Perceived efficacy is a dynamic interplay between knowledge, affect, orientation (experience and schemata), environment and skill.

Similar to theories about depression, parents who report low levels of efficacy may believe that problems they have with their child stem from internal, stable, and global factors (Coleman & Karraker, 1997). Parents with a low sense of self-efficacy may be more apt to experience a sense of hopelessness in the face of challenges. Conversely, parents who report high levels of efficacy show a deep interest, investment, sustainable attention and willingness to expend energy in altering potential negative outcomes of difficult tasks. Life stressors are not conducive to building higher levels of self-efficacy, but the experience of high levels of self-efficacy can be advantageous, and promotes parent and child well being (Coleman & Karraker, 1997).

In order to demonstrate efficacy in parenting, parents need to have knowledge of appropriate child-care responses (e.g., what to do in response to seeing their child in distress), a belief that they can carry out the required response, and in so doing, that they will be supported by their surroundings (Coleman & Karraker, 1997). In particular, feelings of efficacy in the area of parenting are directly related to parents' expectations for their child-care competency, knowledge of the behaviors required to actualize mastery and beliefs about one's ability to positively influence change with one's own children. These schematic beliefs and expectations exist for parents overseeing a child's social, emotional and cognitive development, as well as in their provision of structure and maintenance of their child's health and physical environment. Similarly, in response to their desires and expectations for their child's schooling, parents need to be informed about what to do if they want to intervene with their child's education. They need to have some confidence in their ability to carry out such tasks and feel they will be supported by

their child's school (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1996; Hoover-Demspey & Sandler, 1997).

Results of an intervention study that used imagery and modeling to affect participant perceptions of self-efficacy and unassertive behavior, Kazdin (1979) concluded that covert modeling led to improvements in self-report of efficacy and improvements in assertiveness was also associated with increases in self-efficacy. Different situations call for an evaluation of our coping skills and a consideration of our ability to carry out demanding or difficult tasks in order to achieve desired results. Here, with regard to special education navigation, parents with a greater sense of efficacy, like those who believe they will positively impact their child's education and given relevant information and resources, are more likely to achieve their desired results (McLoughlin, Edge & Strenecky, 1978). Meaningful relationships have been found between parent beliefs and parent practices (Coleman & Karraker, 2000; Grossman et al., 1999; Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997).

Implications for School Psychologists

School psychologists often serve as liaisons between school administrators, assessment specialists, general and special educators and families. In many schools school psychologists can be proactive in defining their roles and constructing or being a part of a school whose mission and philosophy support their desired role. It is important for school psychologists to actively support the ethical implementation of federal regulations that support the needs of children with disabilities. This includes providing

parents with parent-friendly, culturally and linguistically appropriate materials about disabilities, special education procedures and educational rights. It also includes encouraging parent questions and valuing parent expertise about their child and their opinions in educational decision-making. This is accomplished, at least in part, by setting up a safe and welcoming school environment. School psychologists can mediate and negotiate the alliance between school and parent desires and values, and are ethically responsible for assisting in the delivery of a holistic and appropriate education.

The New York City Department of Education requires school psychologists to evaluate the special education process and parent involvement in their schools. This process includes overseeing the ethical implementation of federal mandates (FAPE and LRE), and monitoring and evaluating assessments, progress towards IEP goals, implementation of IEP requirements, and parent and teacher satisfaction with service delivery (New York City Department of Education, 2004). The idea that school psychologists are monitoring the implementation of special education regulations is taken a priori as an ethical obligation. What is learned from this type of inquiry gives school psychologists a better idea about how to address the needs of families of children with disabilities. The findings provide a framework for new program development to occur, creation of new information dissemination tools and ways to strengthen family inclusion.

This study aims to promote school psychologists' (and others) encouragement of parent involvement in the special education referral and placement process. This includes enhancing parent understanding of the process, their child's educational difficulties and

their rights. Authentic inclusion of parents and parent involvement encouraged by all school professionals may foster efficacy among parents.

Action Research

Similar to program evaluation, action research is a form of inquiry used to consider ethical questions where the goal of the analysis will prove important to and have a practical appeal to participants and consumers (Peterat & Smith, 2001). Conclusions from participant action research include conveying the experiences, needs and beliefs of participant stakeholders in research recommendations and findings (Peterat & Smith, 2001). This is an ideal framework for this study as the special education referral and placement process is different for each family; experiences, relationships and diagnoses within familial and cultural contexts are phenomenological. Action research has been used for the promotion of inclusive school practices of students with disabilities (Warger & Burnette, 2003) and in engaging families in research (Turnbull et al., 1998).

Here, the ethical question was whether or not parents, declared by special education laws as primary stakeholders, feel efficacious in their participation in the special education process on behalf of their children with disabilities. If parents do not feel efficacious in the process, the laws are only symbolic and pay lip service to the inclusion of families in educational decision making. Or, if groups of families feel efficacious while others do not, the implementation of the laws may not be supporting the inclusion of all families in a socially just and equitable way. Recommendations from this inquiry are important to school professionals and parents. While laws are written which

favor parent-school involvement and schools may be following the letter of the law, the research into school practice reviewed in this chapter has uncovered that the authentic partnership between families and schools still has room to grow. Information from parent responses to surveys and focus group discussions informed recommendations for program development and system restructuring to promote reaching the goals already written into law.

Survey Research

By administering a valid, reliable and useful citizen survey, researchers can get a first hand evaluation of programs in order to refine practice and policy formulation and implementation. Surveys help public officials determine what constituents need and want from their government. Survey results can be used to make choices, monitor standards, determine priorities and translate popular voice into public policy (Folz, 1996). Additionally, mail surveys are a low cost and easy way to do social research (Cui, 2003). Identifying issues related to parents as an interest group can be done effectively by directing surveys to this population. This can inform policy administration, provide the opportunity to expand the inclusion of stakeholders in decision-making and advance the process of participant democracy (Davies & Zerchykov, 1981). Professional concern about the accurate delivery of special education services stems from a lack of investment by many of the most active participants in the referral and placement process. With this significant educational process, schools need to be responsible for collecting satisfaction measures for quality assurance.

As reported in a parent survey in Virginia, an area of frustration for parents was a lack of understanding of their rights. The same survey indicated a high percentage of parent non-participation in the special education referral and placement process and a call by the authors for parents to be informed about the process and their rights, in order to fully participate (Katsiyannis & Ward, 1992). In another survey done by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, obtaining helpful written materials parents could refer back to later, received the highest response rate for help requested by parents, over meetings with teachers and parent training (Kunesh & Rose, 1990). It is not possible to know how to help parents of children with disabilities until their experience with service provision as it stands is fully understood (Faerstein, 1981).

Findings regarding parent efficacy and satisfaction in the special education process have been mixed. Parents with admittedly less knowledge about this process report high levels of satisfaction (Goldstein et al., 1980; Gordon & Miller, 2003; Singer & Butler, 1987; Spann et al., 2003; TEA, 2004). There are few reports of parents who report being both informed and satisfied. A number of open-ended questionnaires and qualitative surveys exist in this area, highlighting parent satisfaction and understanding of the process (Brantlinger, 1987; Dembinski & Mauser, 1977; Kunesh & Rose, 1990; McKinney & Hocutt, 1982). Of the diverse sample of eighty-three participants Gordon and Miller (2003) interviewed, 96% felt they were a valued member of the IEP team, but only 13 people (22%) said they made a contribution during the meeting. In addition, parents of children receiving special education services may have given a program a high rating, but then said anecdotally that they didn't feel it helped their child much.

Limitations of Survey Research

Some of the limitations of Survey Research include sampling error, self-report, and non-coverage and non-response errors (Cui, 2003). Participants may answer with 'response sets', a pattern to answers that may imply a lack of understanding, careful reading or thoughtful consideration of items. Sampling errors may include the non-inclusion of people who should be in the study (here uninvolved parents) and the non-response of parents who were in the sample and of some participants to certain items on the survey. Consistent with voluntary human subject participation, only those parents willing to devote approximately 20 minutes, and willing and able to read and respond to nearly 80 questions, will participate in this survey. To counter possible non-inclusion of participants that should be involved in this study, relationships were established with six schools to access all parents of students with disabilities attending those public schools.

Having respondents forced to choose on items, though the responses provided may not cover their true response, can also be a limitation of surveys. The writing and ordering of questions can lead to bias and this is a somewhat lengthy three-page survey with quite a bit of reading required. There also can be some (human) coding, data entry and measurement errors, though data entry was checked. The survey was pilot tested on two small groups of parents (group 1: n=6, group 2: n=7) to make the survey more reader and parent friendly.

Summary

Parent involvement is important for the support of school success for all children, especially those with learning and other disabilities. The more parents know about their child's disability the better able they are to support their academic, social and emotional development. Parents of students with disabilities need information in order to actively engage in the special education process and support their child at home and at school. Being well informed, actively involved in at-home and at-school activities and able to seek teacher coordination has an impact on parent feelings of efficacy (Coots, 1998). A lack of confidence, knowledge (Spinelli, 1998; Strickland, 1982) or experiencing a mismatch in communication, values or cultural perceptions may alienate parents from involvement in the special education process (Harry, 1992; Harry et al., 1995). Survey research is a valuable tool for assessing how interest groups believe their programs and institutions are performing, specifically with the delivery of services in our public spheres (Folz, 1996).

There exists a continuum of teachers, those willing, able, and trained to include parents and those who are not. Many teacher certification programs do not provide training on parent involvement in education (Eccles & Harold, 1996) or special education services. It is important for school administrators to orient personnel to school policies and philosophies. Schools are pulled in multiple directions due to current accountability structures and some are more focused on community and family based collaborations than others.

In order to successfully educate children, schools are asked to involve parents, make decent scores on standardized tests, advance teacher learning and keep these environments safe for physical and intellectual development. Parents must be able to know enough to help keep schools invested in their child as an individual. Across the literature, there is a call for the standardized dissemination of clear, user-friendly and relevant information to parents of students with disabilities. Additionally, clearly written district and school policies are needed to encourage parent involvement and increase information dissemination to parents. As stated by Brantlinger (1987), "ineffective involvement of parents is an evasion of real involvement and real respect for the consumer"(p. 100). Information, which is power in educational decision-making, has been concealed as a function of time and fiscal constraints (Davies, 1999; Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1999; Herr, 1999). Parents should be fully informed about this process so that they may be full partners and have the opportunity to make decisions about their child's education (Brantlinger, 1987) and future opportunities. IDEA was premised on a partnership between parents and schools (Zirkel, 2002). In order to be a full participating member of the IEP team, parents require knowledge about the education system, and their child's IEP goals and curriculum (Gordon & Miller, 2003). It is not about the pessimistic view that parents need to protect their child from the system, as if it were an us-them dichotomy (MacMillan & Turnbull, 1983). It is about opening up two systems to potentially processing better outcomes together, giving parents more information and requiring communication and education from schools.

Efficacy is the dynamic interplay of an individual's cognitions, perceptions and emotions about their environment and situations. The navigation of the referral and placement process is a complex interaction between systems, values, mandates and individuals. Both the systems and individuals are vulnerable to being strained by dysfunction, disability and bureaucracy. The literature pointed to the need for more research exploring and measuring efficacy and parent-school involvement in special education. It also pointed to the need for better measures. Policies and services for students with disabilities and their families "directly relate to the values we hold about the equity of opportunity and access to resources, respect for life and human dignity, work, health and well-being, development of human potential, independence and justice" (Bubolz & Whiren, 1984, p. 12).

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH STUDY

Statement of Purpose

It is important for researchers to raise the concern of whether or not there are patterns that describe why some families feel valued in the special education process while others feel alienated. Bennett and DeLuca (1996) clarified that empowerment and efficacy seem to be inextricably linked to the possession of information. However, mixed evidence about parents' feelings of efficacy in the special education process suggests the need for additional research and improved measures in this area (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). In an attempt to avoid the incongruities found in measuring satisfaction with special education involvement activities and services, the present study used efficacy as the construct of measurement to examine parent perceptions of the various procedures and relationships involved in special education. Specifically, navigation efficacy is the theoretical construct proposed which describes perceptions of efficacy people have in new environments when coping with novel experiences, learning new terminology, finding resources for assistance and obtaining support to manage their involvement in a new system.

A critical examination of parent responses to the School Navigation Survey may provide school personnel with information about parent understanding of the special education process. This information can then be used to refine our holistic, culturally respectful and ethical engagement of families of children with special needs.

Recommendations gleaned from this study's findings are made to professionals to help make service delivery more equitable, accessible and inclusive for all families.

The current study was undertaken to increase understanding of parent feelings of efficacy navigating the special education process, and to emphasize their role as important stakeholders. Using responses from the School Navigation Survey (SNS) (Cloth, 2002), the main purpose of this study was to determine the significance of differences in feelings of efficacy navigating special education, among parents of different racial affiliations and educational backgrounds. This analysis further illuminates how the possession of information in this process may favor certain family groups. This information helps us develop a deeper understanding of ways to bolster efficacy in this process, strengthen collaborations between families and schools and serve the greater objective of positive educational outcomes for children in special education.

Another purpose of this study was to determine the psychometric properties of the exploratory measure used to assess parent feelings of efficacy in the navigation of the special education referral and placement process. The SNS (2002) measures parent feelings of efficacy in home-school relationships, special education procedures and coping with a child with a disability. Reliability and validity of the scale helped establish its potential use by school personnel to monitor standards of service delivery and parent involvement in special education.

The following chapter describes the procedures for this study and discusses the results of demographic data. Chapter 5 presents quantitative data analyses of survey responses for proposed hypotheses (N=139) and content analysis of qualitative data

obtained from four focus groups (*N*=22). Chapter 6 includes a discussion of the results and how it relates to literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Chapter 6 also includes limitations of the present study, implications for policy and practice and recommendations for future research.

Quantitative Research Questions and Hypotheses

The following questions and hypotheses were developed to test differences in feelings of efficacy between groups of parents navigating the special education system.

Research Question 1

Do parents with different group affiliations (minority status and educational attainment) have statistically significantly different perceptions of efficacy in the navigation of the special education system, as measured by the School Navigation Survey?

Hypothesis 1. Parents with higher and lower levels of educational attainment will have significantly different mean efficacy scores. Parents with more education will report higher levels of efficacy than parents with lower levels of educational attainment. Educational attainment was measured on two levels: level 0 was fewer years of formal schooling than an Associate degree and level 1 was an Associate degree or more formal schooling.

Hypothesis 2. Parents who are minority and non-minority racially affiliated will have significantly different mean efficacy scores. Non-minority parents will report higher levels of efficacy than minority parents. This factor was also

measured on two levels: level 0 was White/Caucasian (non-minority) and level 1 was all racial affiliations other than White/Caucasian (minority).

Research Question 2

Do parents who report lower levels of IEP/ARD meeting attendance also report lower levels of perceived efficacy in the navigation of the special education system?

Hypothesis 1. Parents with lower levels of IEP meeting attendance will have lower overall navigation efficacy scores. Parents who reported attending all of their child's IEP meetings were considered to have high levels of meeting attendance.

Qualitative Research Question

The main qualitative research question was developed to assist in establishing the construct validity of the exploratory measure developed for this study. Four focus groups were conducted, with a total of 22 participants. There were two additional qualitative research questions which were more informal and included a discussion of parent perceptions of the comprehensiveness of the SNS and the impact of education and race on feelings of efficacy in the special education process.

Research Question 1

Did the survey, as reflected by focus group questions taken from the survey, measure the construct of efficacy?

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Seven hundred survey packets were distributed to six schools and half a dozen parent agencies and groups. One hundred and thirty-nine parents provided survey responses resulting in an overall response rate of 20%. Twenty of the forty-one parents contacted participated in one of four focus groups, two parents brought their spouses.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Parents of children in central and north Texas public schools currently served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) were included in this study. These students had a current Individual Education Program (IEP) and were receiving some services or accommodations. Because the main research question in this study concerned the racial affiliation and educational background of parent respondents, diverse parent groups were solicited for participation. In keeping with an interest in traditional school settings and personnel, children in full-time alternative education placements and private schools were not included in the present study. Students not currently receiving services or accommodations under IDEA were also not included in the study.

Demographics

The total number of survey responses received was 139 out of the 700 distributed. Tables 1, 2 and 3 display demographic data obtained from survey responses and include

information about parent gender, racial affiliation, years of formal schooling, child receipt of free or reduced price lunch and child disability classification.

Table 1 displays information about parent gender and racial affiliation of survey respondents. The vast majority of responses were received from females at a rate of 18 to 1. With regard to racial affiliation, the highest rate of participation was among Caucasians (68%), with Hispanic (15%), African American (9%) and Asian Americans (4%) following. Percentages of minority responses were quite low for the state of Texas (see Table 4, p. 73 for comparison) and for the schools included in the study (see Table 7, p. 90 for comparison).

Table 1

Participant Gender (N=137) and Educational Attainment (N=139)

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Female	127	92.0
Male	7	5.5
Both	3	2.2
Educational Attainment		
No School	0	--
No High School	1	.7
Some High School	8	5.8
Completed High School	15	10.8
Some Trade School/Community College/College	40	28.8
Associate Degree	16	11.5
Bachelor Degree	39	28.1
Some Graduate School	7	5.0
Graduate Degree	13	9.4

Note: Frequencies not adding to 139, and percentages not adding to 100, reflect missing data.

As shown in Table 2, parents with higher levels of educational attainment were more likely to respond. The distribution was bimodal with the highest frequencies of responses being Some Trade School, Community College or College and an earned Bachelor's degree. Twenty percent of parents endorsed that their child received a Free or Reduced Price Lunch and this percentage was representative of the districts surveyed.

Table 2

Participant Racial Affiliation (N=138) and Child Receipt of Free or Reduced Price Lunch (N=137)

	Frequency	Percent
Racial Affiliation		
African American	12	8.6
American Indian	1	.7
Asian American	5	3.6
Biracial	3	2.2
Caucasian	94	67.6
Hispanic/ Latino	21	15.1
Pacifica Islander	1	.7
Other	1	.7
Free or Reduced Price Lunch		
Yes	28	20.1
No	109	78.4

Note: Frequencies not adding to 139, and percentages not adding to 100, reflect missing data.

Additional descriptive data presented in Table 3 shows disability classification of survey respondents' children. Child disability classification was primarily Autism, Learning Disability, Other Health Impairment and Speech/ Language Impairment. Only one disability classification, Traumatic Brain Injury, was not represented. These data were also not representative of the state of Texas due to sampling procedures and the ease of access to parent support groups for families who have children on the Autism spectrum. According to the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS), the database maintained by the Texas Education Agency, approximately 450,000 students

were classified as special education students in the state of Texas. Of these, the highest percentages of children fell under five classifications: 54.8% had a specific Learning Disability, 15% Speech/Language Impairment, 9.5% Other Health Impairment, 7.4% Emotionally Disturbed and 6.9% Mentally Retarded (PEIMS, 2002).

Table 3

Participant Child Disability Classification (N=135)

Disability Classification	Frequency	Percent
Autism Spectrum Disorder	35	25.2
Orthopedic Impairment	3	2.2
Auditory Impairment	3	2.2
Learning Disability	31	22.3
Other Health Impairment	10	7.2
Multiple Disabilities	4	2.9
Speech or Language Impairment	31	22.3
Mental Retardation	9	6.5
Emotional Disturbance	7	5.0
Visual Impairment	1	.7
Traumatic Brain Injury	0	--
Deaf-Blind	1	.7

Note: Frequencies not adding to 139, and percentages not adding to 100, reflect missing data.

Site and Participant Selection

This study was conducted primarily in conjunction with Round Rock and Lewisville Independent School Districts, along with several other family support

agencies. Participants were self-selected respondents of a convenience sample. Respondents from diverse cultural, socio-economic and educational backgrounds were specifically recruited in order to get a representative sample of the population of the state of Texas.

Demographics of survey respondents are compared to state population statistics in Table 4. Participation by minority parent respondents in this study was not representative of the population of the state of Texas. Forty-eight percent of Texans are minority racially affiliated and 70% have less formal schooling than an Associate degree (US Census, 2003). Thirty-two percent of respondents to this study were minority racially affiliated and 46% of respondents had fewer years of schooling than an Associate degree.

Table 4

Comparison of the State of Texas and Study Participants

	Texas Population	SNS Respondents
Minority Racial Affiliation	48%	32%
Less Formal Schooling than Associate Degree	70%	46%

Design Overview

This study was an in-depth inquiry examining feelings of efficacy in navigating special education related activities for parents of children with disabilities in central and north Texas. This regional, single cross-section survey research study explored

experiences with and attitudes about school personnel and special education services, as well as the beliefs, opinions and behaviors of parents of public school children with current Individualized Education Programs (IEP). Participating parents had a child (or children) who met eligibility criterion as a student with a disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and attended a public school in central or north Texas.

Measure

The measure used in this study was the School Navigation Survey (SNS) (Appendix A). This instrument introduced a scale for the assessment of parent perceptions of efficacy as it pertains to their involvement in special education activities. The SNS contains 76 items within four sections: Background Information, Services Received, Experiences with Referral, Assessment and Placement, and an Efficacy Evaluation.

The Background Information section includes 8 items, which utilizes multiple-choice responses about child disability classification, and the race and educational attainment of the parent respondent. The second section, Services Received, contains 10 items about child receipt of services in a yes or no closed answer format. The third section, Experiences with Referral, Assessment and Placement, contains 23 items about the special education process and includes questions on the phases of the process, school personnel contacts and knowledge of community resources and is also in a yes or no closed answer format. The final Efficacy Evaluation section contains 35 items on a five-

point Likert scale ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’; with the option of a neutral response. This final section, the Efficacy Evaluation, was used to calculate individual scores of overall efficacy and Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient for the scale. The Efficacy Evaluation of involvement addresses several domains including parent-school interactions, emotional strain, level of involvement, understanding of procedures, accessibility of information and feelings of accomplishment. Twelve of the 35 items are negatively worded (and reverse-scored).

The two independent variables Educational Attainment and Racial Affiliation were measured at two levels due to constraints of a small sample size and the desire to conduct analyses on group efficacy scores. Though parents had eight choices for racial affiliation and nine choices for educational attainment on the survey, each variable was recoded. The first factor, educational attainment, was recoded to include two levels of less formal schooling than an Associate degree (0) and an Associate degree or more formal schooling (1). The second factor, racial affiliation, was recoded to include two levels of non-minority (0) and minority racially affiliated (1).

This survey, which was first developed in December, 2001, has gone thorough four faculty reviews and was individually tested with two colleagues (parents of children in the public school special education system known by the investigator). Suggestions from professional experts and parents were incorporated into the final document. The survey is grounded in efficacy and family-school involvement theories, as well as literature on the needs of families of children with disabilities. The survey incorporates language from scales developed by Coleman and Karraker (2000) in the area of parent feelings of

efficacy and Grossman, Osterman and Schmelkin (1999) in the area of parent feelings of efficacy and school involvement.

The SNS consists of agreement and rating scales. Data types include opinion, attitudes, experience, attributes and preferences. Agreement scales used either a two-point closed answer (Yes or No) or as in the Efficacy Evaluation section, a five point Likert scale labeled 'Strongly Agree', 'Agree', 'Neutral', 'Disagree' and 'Strongly Disagree'. The Likert scale responses were coded as follows: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4) and strongly agree (5), except for negatively worded items which are the reverse: strongly agree (1), agree (2), neutral (3), disagree (4) and strongly disagree (5). Questions that were negatively worded (i.e., I have no control over my child's education) had strong agreement to the question scored as a one, indicating a parents' perceived feeling of negative efficacy (resulting in lower scores). Conversely, if the question was positively worded (e.g., I have the ability to positively enhance the direction and success of my child's education), strong agreement to the question was scored as a five, indicating a parents' perceived feeling of positive efficacy. Answers to the 35 Efficacy Evaluation items were summed to determine a respondents' overall efficacy score. Possible efficacy scores ranged from 35 (lowest) to 175 (highest). Higher scores indicate higher levels of perceived efficacy in the navigation of the special education referral and placement process. Responses to the Efficacy Evaluation section of the SNS were used as the dependent variable in this study.

Pilot Measure Data

The School Navigation Survey was piloted on November of 2002 with six parents of a social competence research project at the University of Texas at Austin (Principal Investigator: Margaret Semrud-Clikeman, Ph.D.). Four mothers met with the investigator and went through their thoughts about each question, and two other mothers filled out the survey on their own and returned it with comments and suggestions. Of these, one mother was Hispanic and five were Caucasian, SES and education were not asked. Since this was the original pilot with families, feedback was largely centered on clarification issues (e.g., which teacher and/or year specification).

The School Navigation Survey was then piloted at a parent conference in July of 2004. Seven families completed the survey during a two-day conference given by Texas Parent to Parent. This was a free conference for parents, subsidized by the agency. Parent respondents included one minority racially affiliated parent, one lower educationally attained parent and three low SES parents (an income bracket question was included in this version of the survey that has since been removed). Other respondents were majority racially affiliated and had some college or more formal education. Respondents gave feedback that the chart for helpful personnel contacts (which has since been deleted) was confusing and some wording of questions should be more disability inclusive (e.g., do you believe your child can learn to compensate for his or her disability).

Reliability

Reliability for the SNS was determined by computing Cronbach's alpha coefficients and these were compared to other surveys in the field of parent involvement

in education and parent efficacy. Grossman et al., (1999) had reliability coefficients ranging from .58 to .86; surveys measuring self-efficacy in parenting tasks or school involvement reported reliability coefficients from .60 to .92 (Coleman & Karraker, 2000) and .81 (Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997). A widely used standard in social sciences, minimal acceptable reliability coefficient was .70 (Aron & Aron, 1999; Garson, 2005).

Reliability determination for this measure utilized 125 valid cases. Valid cases were defined as surveys with all 35 entries completed on the final section of the SNS. The 35 items in the Efficacy Evaluation section included 12 reverse-scored negatively worded items and 23 positively worded items. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for this scale was .946 indicating the instrument had strong internal consistency. Items had strong item-total correlation coefficients, ranging from .31 to .84, with most (22) in the range of .54 to .76. Three items, with the lowest item-total correlations, appeared to contribute least to the overall alpha: 'I am able to help my child with academic work at home' (.31); 'I am actively involved in my child's education' (.32); and 'I have seen other parents cope successfully with the activities involved in the special education process' (.36). These items were included to assess parents' current involvement with their child's education in the home, their perception of involvement practices, as well as to explore Bandura's (1989) theory that vicarious experience may impact feelings of efficacy. One item had a negative item-total correlation (-.34), 'if I knew more about the special education process, I may try harder to get my child services at school'. Deleting this item would result in a recalculated reliability coefficient of .952. This item did not appear to assess its original intent –that if parents felt they lacked information, they would work

harder when given more information. In general, parents in this sample reported high levels of information possession. The item with the highest item-total correlation (.84) was ‘it is a struggle to get my child the help I believe he/she needs at school every year’.

Table 5

Item-Total Correlations

Item	Item-Total Correlation	Chronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
I am frustrated by the amount of time I spend working with the school to serve my child.	.70	.94
It is a struggle to get my child the help he/she needs at school.	.84	.94
It is upsetting for me to be in school meetings.	.66	.94
I am upset that my child's teacher may not be following up through on my child's IEP goals in the classroom.	.67	.94
Dealing with my child's education produces stress at home.	.64	.94
I feel welcomed by my child's school.	.69	.94
I feel like I have no control over my child's education.	.75	.94
Dealing with child's education is frustrating me.	.67	.94
I am an equal team member in school meetings about my child.	.76	.94
I have been successful getting my child needed school services in the past.	.71	.94
Meetings with school personnel are hard for me.	.63	.94
It is easy for me to get my child the education he/she deserves.	.67	.94
My child is in the right educational placement.	.73	.94
I am uncomfortable going to my child's school.	.50	.94
I have seen other parents cope successfully with activities involved in special education.	.36	.95
I work in cooperation with my child's school to educate my child.	.57	.94
I understand the decision to place my child in special education.	.53	.94
I feel encouraged to participate in my child's IEP meetings.	.57	.94
I get along with my child's teacher.	.64	.94
There is at least one person I feel comfortable talking to, that is involved in my child's education.	.57	.94
I know my child's educational rights.	.54	.94
My child's school is considerate of my time and obligations, making this process easier for me.	.66	.94

Item-Total Correlations continued

I believe I can have a positive effect on the direction and success of my child's education.	.45	.95
My child's school has done its best to keep me informed about testing & placement decisions.	.62	.94
I am able to ask for what my child needs from his/her school.	.64	.94
I expect to get my child what he/she needs to be successful in school.	.52	.94
The time and energy I spend with school staff working on my child's education is worth the effort.	.44	.95
I am able to help my child with academic work at home.	.31	.95
I am able to stand up for my child's rights in this process.	.50	.94
Other parents have more success in this process than I do.	.51	.94
It is easy fort me to take an active role in my child's education.	.63	.94
It has been difficult for me to educate myself about my child's diagnosis.	.48	.94
I am actively involved in my child's education.	.32	.95
It has been difficult for me to educate myself about special education procedures and services.	.66	.94
If I knew more about the special education process I may try harder to get my child services.	-.34	.95

Validity

Content and construct validity for this instrument were partially established using focus groups. Focus group sessions were semi-structured, guided by questions from the survey (SNS) and explored feelings of efficacy in special education navigation. Data collected from these focus groups generated statements to defend both content and construct validity. Parents commented that the survey was comprehensive and covered the areas they felt needed attention, and they discussed impacts on their feelings of efficacy which reflected Bandura's theory (see qualitative data analysis, Chapter 5). An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to assist in determining the construct validity of the measure. Results were similar to other scale reductions performed on surveys in

the field (Grossman et al., 1999). Another study might be done at a later date to see whether or not the SNS has predictive validity of parent involvement. The SNS did not appear to reliably detect differences between groups and this may be due to the homogeneity of the (school involved) sample or to the scale itself.

Exploratory Factor Analysis. Due to the strict assumptions for this type of data reduction on a scale, a sample of at least 150 (Hinkin, 1995; Hutcheson & Sofroniou, 1999) or a ratio of 5 (Bryant & Yarnold, 1995), to a more conservative 10 (Nunnally, 1978), participants to items is suggested, and the current survey's ratio was nearly 4 to 1, a factor analysis was not performed before main analyses were conducted and was done as an additional analysis to assist in establishing the validity of the SNS. The 35 efficacy evaluation items of the SNS were subjected to principal axis factoring analysis, using SPSS. Prior to conducting the analysis, the suitability of the data for factor analysis was assessed. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954), was significant and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) was .91, an ideal value and one well above the recommended value of .6 (Kaiser, 1974). This, along with a factor matrix resulting in many coefficients above .4 (32 out of 35), indicated a factor analysis may be appropriate. However, given the sample size, these results should be interpreted with caution. Results for the principal axis factor analysis are shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Factor Loadings (N = 137)

Items	Factor 1
I am frustrated by the amount of time I spend working with the school to serve my child.	.69
It is a struggle to get my child the help he/she needs at school.	.81
It is upsetting for me to be in school meetings.	.62
I am upset that my child's teacher may not be following up through on my child's IEP goals in the classroom.	.64
Dealing with my child's education produces stress at home.	.63
I feel welcomed by my child's school.	.71
I feel like I have no control over my child's education.	.72
Dealing with child's education is frustrating me.	.63
I am an equal team member in school meetings about my child.	.77
I have been successful getting my child school services he/she needs in the past.	.70
Meetings with school personnel are hard for me.	.65
It is easy for me to get my child the education he/she deserves.	.67
My child is in the right educational placement.	.71
I am uncomfortable going to my child's school.	.52
I have seen other parents cope successfully with activities involved in special education.	.40
I work in cooperation with my child's school to educate my child.	.61
I understand how the decision was made to place my child in special education.	.58
I feel encouraged to participate in my child's IEP meetings.	.62
I get along with my child's teacher.	.67
There is at least one person I feel comfortable talking to, that is involved in my child's education.	.62
I know my child's educational rights.	.58
My child's school is considerate of my time and obligations, making this process easier for me.	.68
I believe I can have a positive effect on the direction and success of my child's education.	.50
My child's school has done its best to keep me informed about testing & placement decisions.	.61
I am able to ask for what my child needs from his/her school.	.68

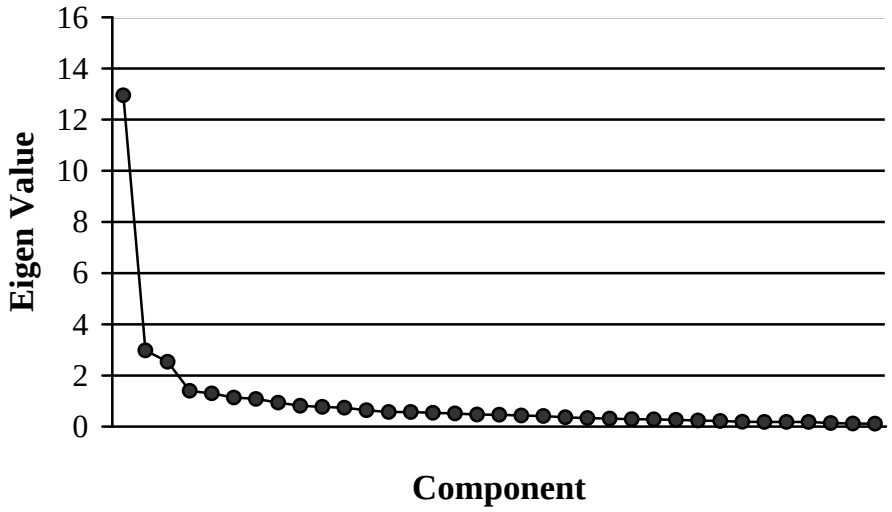
Factor Loadings cont.

I expect to get my child what he/she needs to be successful in school.	.53
The time and energy I spend with school staff working on my child's education is worth the effort.	.49
I am able to help my child with academic work at home.	.34
I am able to stand up for my child's rights in this process.	.51
Other parents have more success in this process than I do.	.51
It is easy fort me to take an active role in my child's education.	.67
It has been difficult for me to educate myself about my child's diagnosis.	.52
I am actively involved in my child's education.	.38
It has been difficult for me to educate myself about special education procedures and services.	.65
If I knew more about the special education process I may try harder to get my child services.	-.33

Principal axis factoring analysis revealed the presence of seven factors with Eigen values exceeding 1.0. A one-factor solution was hypothesized to see if the scale measured the construct of efficacy. After inspecting the Scree plot (Figure 1), there was a significant and clear break after the first factor and a small break after the third factor. One factor was extracted to see if the scale was unidimensional. The first factor had the strongest factor loading values and accounted for nearly 40% of the variance in the un-rotated solution and resulted in an Eigen value of 12.93. Results indicated the factor may represent the construct of efficacy and appears to address positive and negative impacts on efficacy in parent-special education involvement. Only four items had low factor loading coefficients, these did not appear to effectively measure the construct but were included because they were thought to tap into impacts on efficacy including vicarious ('I have seen other parents cope successfully with activities involved in special education')

and direct experience ('I am actively involved in my child's education'; 'If I knew more about the special education process I may try harder to get my child services'; and 'I am able to help my child with academic work at home').

Figure 1. Scree Plot



SNS and TEA's Survey of Satisfaction (2004). Though parents who returned the SNS were not asked to also complete TEA's recent parent satisfaction survey, several of the questions are analogous (see Appendix G). The overall return rate for the TEA survey was 15.6%, 32,000 surveys were distributed and approximately 5,000 were returned. The overall return rate for the survey used in the present study was 19.9%, 700 SNS surveys were distributed and 139 were returned. Return rates by race and education were somewhat dissimilar, with TEA manifesting a greater degree of diversity. Seventy-two percent of TEA respondents had less than a college education compared to 58% of SNS

respondents. Forty-six percent of TEA respondents identified as racial minorities compared to 32% of SNS respondents.

The majority of parents (91%) were satisfied with their degree of participation in special education according to the TEA survey. According to SNS results, slightly fewer parents (81%) thought they were equal team members in IEP meetings, but nearly the same percentage of parents (89%) felt they were encouraged to participate in these meetings. Ninety percent of parents responding to the TEA survey reported understanding why their child was eligible for special education and the vast majority of parents (94%) responding to the SNS felt they understood this decision as well.

Rates were very high for parents reporting they had received information about special education services from their school; all but one respondent to the SNS had received information about their educational rights from their child's school. Far fewer parents responding to the TEA survey had received written information about their child's disability (71%) than SNS respondents (90%). According to TEA's survey fewer parents knew they could review their child's records (84%), request a planning conference before an ARD (64%) or request an ARD (79%) (*M*= 76%), than parents responding that they knew their educational rights on the SNS (92%). Only 30% of parents responding to TEA's survey were aware of the agency's special education Helpline and 47% were aware that TEA provided community resources including education and training opportunities for parents of children with special needs and 75% of SNS respondents reported they were aware of their community resources for families

of children with special needs. Similarly high rates of involvement and information possession were seen from both samples.

Survey Procedures

Sampling

Round Rock. The first sampling unit was taken of parents with children in special education from the Round Rock Independent School District (RRISD). This district consists of 39 campuses: 27 elementary schools, 8 middle schools, and 4 high schools. Round Rock ISD is located just north of Austin, Texas and consists of 37,000 students with just more than 10% (4,000) currently served under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). The racial breakdown of the overall district at the time of this study was 10% African American, 21% Hispanic, 8% Asian American and 60% Caucasian. Twenty-one percent of families are considered economically disadvantaged by state standards (Texas Education Agency, 2004). Within the district there are schools that are substantially more racially and economically diverse. Round Rock ISD has a strong framework for the support of families with children with disabilities. There are two parent liaisons, a Family Support Network and campus special education representatives (parent volunteers) for many campuses. Along with a special education newsletter, the campus representatives meet monthly, as does the Family Support Network. Additionally, the Special Education Parent Advisory Council (which oversees these groups) holds ‘coffee’ sessions once a month for parents of children with disabilities. Since a majority of the parents participating in focus groups were from RRISD, two of

the four groups were held at their local Mental Health Mental Retardation (MHMR) facility. Surveys were collected from parents of children in special education in this suburban central Texas district over an eight-week period beginning in February of 2005. After an initial analysis of the data, focus groups were held in May of 2005.

Other Agencies. Additional sampling units were taken for the recruitment of participants. Parent agencies and school district groups sampled included Pflugerville Independent School District Autism Support Group, Austin Family Support Cooperative, Austin Chapter of CHADD: Children with Attention Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder, The Thoughtful House, University of Texas Social Competence Intervention Project, Texas Parent to Parent and Kipp Academy. The investigator amended the University of Texas IRB application to include each new forum for data collection.

Lewisville. The final sampling unit was taken of parents with children in special education from the Lewisville Independent School District (LISD). This district consists of 57 campuses: 38 elementary schools, 14 middle schools, and 5 high schools. LISD is located just north of Dallas, Texas and consists of 44,024 students with just more than 11% (4,850) currently served under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). The racial breakdown of the overall district is 8.2% African American, 16% Hispanic, 6.6% Asian American and 69% Caucasian. Approximately 20% of families are considered by state standards to be economically disadvantaged (Texas Education Agency, 2004). Within the district there are school campuses that are substantially more racially and economically diverse. Two types of support are offered to parents of children receiving special education services: a monthly Family Focus Night, providing child and adult

programming for families with children on the Autism spectrum, and the Family Center, providing family counseling, support groups and parent training to families of children with special needs. Data collection for this district began in October of 2005 and ended in December of 2005. Data collection ceased due to limited funds, exhaustion of resources and the number of majority racially affiliated responses consistently outnumbering minority racially affiliated responses.

Utilizing Texas Education Agency data, schools with high levels of diversity were recruited for participation in this study. However, only certain school principals, six of the original twelve solicited, were willing to participate in a mass distribution of the survey to their families. Some chose not to participate, stating they "already ask their families to do a lot of paperwork" and two of the twelve principals recruited for the study said they would participate if the survey were translated into Spanish. One other school said they would not do a mass distribution of the survey, due to their high levels of Spanish-only speaking parents, but offered to hand the survey out to specific individuals (before or after ARD meetings) if they knew the parent could read English. Two of the final six principals willing to participate mentioned they did not have much hope for surveys to be returned. One of the principals, whose school was included in the study, mentioned his school did a survey to all parents the year before and had a 10% return rate (for the school recruitment letter, see Appendix I).

Demographic data from the Texas Education Agency (2002) for the six schools included in the mass distribution of surveys is displayed in Table 5. These schools ranged from 31% to 79% minority student enrollment. District percentages of children receiving

a Free or Reduced Price Lunch (*M* =19.85) were approximately equal to the percent of SNS respondents endorsing their child received a Free or Reduced Price Lunch (20%).

Table 7

Schools Involved in Distribution of Surveys

		Caucasian	African American	Hispanic	Asian American
Round Rock ISD	Central TX 1	51.0	19.0	25.0	4.9
20.35%	Central TX 2	69.0	9.5	16.0	5.7
	Central TX 3	21.0	5.7	71.0	1.8
Lewisville ISD	North TX 1	42.0	33.0	14.0	11.0
19.42% [a]	North TX 2	61.0	12.0	22.0	4.8
	North TX 3	24.0	13.0	59.0	2.6

[a] Percent of students receiving a Free or Reduced Price Lunch

Protection of Human Subjects

Approval from the Institutional Review Board was sought prior to data collection. Surveys were coded with a number and respondents had the option of remaining anonymous. Data collected during the first phase of this study fell under the UT IRB human subjects' research category of Exempt #2: the collection of data via survey procedures without sensitive questions and where no mandatory identifying information is required. A short consent form accompanied surveys, which described the study and their rights as participants. Documentation of consent was not required because participants could remain anonymous if they wished. Data collected during the second phase of the study, the focus groups, falls under UT-IRB human subjects' research

category of Expedited #6: required documentation of consent due to audio-taping participant comments and receipt of identifying information. These consent forms are provided in the Appendices (see Appendix B for the short consent form and Appendix D for the long consent form). This study complied with the research standards outlined by the American Psychological Association and the University of Texas at Austin.

The first phase of the study required no documentation of consent, the short consent form inserted in survey packets stated the return of the survey implied consent. The second phase of data collection required written consent. Documentation of consent was obtained from each participant at the outset of focus groups after they were provided an explanation of the study, and information about focus group goals and audio-taping. One-on-one structured interviews were not conducted due to a lack of interest. Data collection began when the UT and RRISD IRB both provided the investigator with a letter of approval (see Appendices H and J). Amendments were submitted for each new site and a continuing review was sought and approved during the summer of 2005.

Study Phases

This study was preceded by two preparatory phases. The first entailed the construction of the School Navigation Survey, the instrument used to measure parent feelings of efficacy in the special education process. Items on the survey used efficacy 'ability' language and were developed utilizing Bandura's (2006) Guide to Constructing Efficacy Items, as well as previous measures examining efficacy in parent-school involvement (Grossman et al., 1999) and efficacy in parenting tasks (Coleman &

Karraker, 1997). The second phase was the pilot testing of the original instrument with 13 parents of children receiving special education services in public schools.

This study consisted of three additional phases. The first phase included the administration of the self-report survey (SNS) to 139 parents. The investigator elicited participation from Round Rock Independent School District (RRISD) and the Lewisville Independent School District and supplied surveys and consent forms in self-addressed stamped envelopes to three schools in each district as well as Round Rock's Family Support Network (FSN), one charter school and six parent agencies and groups.

The second phase of the study involved the collection of qualitative data through focus group facilitation. Results from these groups were used to validate the exploratory scale and to evaluate additional concerns, needs and areas of strength experienced by parents. Parents indicating via survey that they were willing to participate in a one-hour focus group were contacted (for phone script and email text see Appendix C). The investigator called or emailed parents to provide further explanation about the study and a choice of focus group times and places for interested participants. Focus group families were asked for an email or home address so the investigator could mail them a reminder letter with date, time and location information. Four focus groups were held and facilitated by the author of this dissertation. The facilitator asked participants to discuss topics and ensuing conversations were audio-taped. A guide for focus group questions can be found in Appendix E. Questions were asked about the survey as well as parent attitudes about and experiences with the special education system.

The third phase of this study involved the analysis of data collected for proposed hypotheses. A two-way analysis of variance was used to determine the impact of parent racial affiliation and education attainment on levels of efficacy. The second research question was analyzed using Pearson's Product Moment correlation of high and low levels of efficacy with parent report of IEP meeting attendance. After the audiotapes from focus groups were transcribed, naturalistic statements were content analyzed and coded for themes about the measure (SNS), parent efficacy and involvement in special education. These categories were then grouped into four over-arching concepts discussed in the Qualitative Results section of Chapter 5.

Initial Phases. The study began when the investigator met with a RRISD parent liaison on January 6, 2005 and informally with parents at a parent coffee event on February 1, 2005. A plan was devised to submit a brief summary of the study to the RRISD special education newsletter and add a synopsis of the study and involvement information to the next Family Support Network meeting on February 21st, 2005. Additionally, the investigator was invited to the next special education campus representatives meeting on March 8th, 2005. In addition to the investigator having a room for survey administration and distribution at the one of the Family Support Network meetings and at two of the RRISD coffee events, the investigator asked special education campus representatives to pass surveys along to other parents.

The RRSID parent liaisons asked that codes for the four RRISD learning communities be added to the survey in order to use the data for their own internal

evaluation of the different learning communities. These four learning communities are categorized by high school feeding patterns.

During initial meetings the investigator asked if the district had an official research IRB procedure and none was known. The director of special education provided approval for the study. However, a few weeks into initial data collection one of the campus representatives told the investigator she had become aware of an official procedure for conducting research. The investigator immediately filed an application, ceased data collection and returned only after the study received approval from RRISD's Department of Assessment and Research.

After emailing leaders of organizations in the area about the study, the investigator received approval to recruit participants during several conferences and parent support group meetings. The investigator attended a conference on April 3, 2005 for the Thoughtful House, an organization assessing developmental delays and providing support to families with children on the Autism spectrum. At the conference the investigator passed out surveys and consent forms in self addressed stamped envelopes directly to parents in attendance. The investigator also attended two support groups for parents of Autistic children, one in Pflugerville on March 31, 2005 and one at the Austin Family Support Cooperative meeting on April 12, 2005. The Austin chapter of Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder (CHADD) also gave formal approval to distribute surveys at their meeting on April 12, 2005 in Austin. Additional surveys were distributed to parents through the directors of Texas Parent to Parent, an agency that supports parents of children with disabilities. The investigator distributed surveys at the

UT Social Competence Intervention Project and Kipp Academy, a diverse charter school in Austin. See data collection log for more information about dates and places packets were distributed (Appendix F).

Finally, in an attempt to boost response rates from minority families, the investigator met with the Chief Psychologist and Executive Director of Special Education for the Lewisville Independent School District where the investigator was employed as a pre-doctoral school psychology intern. After the study was reviewed and approved, surveys were distributed in October and November to families attending Family Focus Night sessions and the Family Center. Letters were also sent to seven principals of schools with high levels of diversity. Three principals responded they were willing to have their schools included in the study. The investigator distributed surveys to these three schools in November of 2005.

Data Collection

The instrument administration phase entailed the distribution of 700 packets, which included a Short Consent Form cover letter (Appendix B) and a School Navigation Survey (Appendix A) enclosed in a self-addressed stamped envelope. All survey responses were treated confidentially, and most were also anonymous (n= 98). Only parents who provided contact information for participation in focus groups had identifying information on their surveys. A total of 700 surveys were distributed and 139 survey responses were received, a 20% response rate.

Surveys distributed in schools were given to children's contact teachers or the special education director, then handed out to children for them to bring home to a parent.

A file box labeled “Special Education Parent Study” was placed in school main offices and administrators were notified of the file’s purpose and asked to direct parents returning surveys to that box. The packets did have self-addressed stamped envelopes and this was the way almost all of the surveys were returned (*n*= 136). Surveys distributed at conferences, meetings or support groups were given directly to parents.

Survey questions measured perceptions and attitudes about special education involvement among parents with high and low levels of education attainment and minority and non-minority racial affiliation. Results were used to explore feelings of efficacy and patterns of behavior of parents involved in the special education referral and placement process. This study evaluated, on a small regional scale, how well the objective of parent inclusion promoted in special education laws is being attained, by exploring parent levels of efficacy in the process. Findings inform holistic and ethical family inclusion practices for school psychologists and other school professionals.

Data Entry Accuracy

In order to protect against data entry errors, a fellow graduate student in the department of School Psychology was paid to check for data entry accuracy when the investigator had 100 surveys. In doing so, the student found nine errors in data entry by pulling and checking every 5th survey (n= 20) and 1520 items, resulting in a 99.99% accuracy rate. All surveys were re-checked by the investigator at the completion of data collection and this resulted in six errors. All errors were subsequently corrected.

Focus Group Participants

Forty-one parents were contacted to participate in focus groups, twenty parents were willing to participate and two asked if they could bring their spouses to a focus group session. Participants were recruited from contact information they provided on the School Navigation Survey. Participation was voluntary and parents were told the purpose of the study was to better understand parent efficacy in special education involvement. All facets of this study were approved by the University of Texas Institutional Review Board before beginning data collection. Focus group participants were paid ten dollars for their time and received additional incentives including pizza, soda and child-care provided by fellow graduate students from the School Psychology Department at the University of Texas at Austin. Focus group participation ranged from four to eight members per group. Groups were audio-taped; however, the third focus group was not audio-taped due to a technical malfunction which rendered the audio irretrievable. After this malfunction was realized, notes were generated from memory for the third focus group; all other sessions were transcribed.

All focus groups were facilitated by the author of this dissertation. Questions were asked about school personnel relations, their child's assessment and their IEP meeting involvement. Questions were also asked about how participants felt their educational background and racial affiliation influenced their navigation of special education. Inclusion criteria for participation in focus groups was the same as for survey response participation and required that a parent have a child currently served in special education with an Individualized Education Program (IEP). By targeting schools with high levels

of racial and economic diversity for survey distribution, an attempt was made to include diverse participants so that a broad range of attitudes would be represented.

Tables 8 and 9 display the demographic data of focus group participants. Focus groups included parents of children ranging in age from 4 years old, attending Preschool Programs for Children with Disabilities (PPCD), to 19 years old. Five of the twenty-two focus group participants were Hispanic and the rest were Caucasian. Two participants were parents of children receiving a free or reduced price lunch. Participants included three fathers and nineteen mothers. Of the parent participants, five were categorized as lower educationally attained and fifteen were higher educationally attained. The two spouses of the survey respondents did not provide educational information.

Table 8

Focus Group Participant Racial Affiliation and Gender (N = 22)

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Female	19	86.3
Male	3	13.7
Racial Affiliation		
Caucasian	17	77.3
Hispanic	5	22.7

Table 9

Focus Group Participant Receipt of Free or Reduced Price Lunch (N = 22) and Educational Attainment (N=20)

	Frequency	Percent
Free or Reduced Price Lunch		
Yes	2	10.0
No	20	90.0
Educational Attainment		
Completed High School	2	9.1
Some Trade School/CC/College	3	13.6
Associate Degree	5	22.7
Bachelor Degree	9	40.9
Some Graduate School	1	4.5

Note: Frequencies not adding to 22, and percentages not adding to 100, reflect missing data.

Frequency data for child disability categories represented by parents participating in focus groups can be found in Table 10. Parents were recruited from school districts, parent support agencies and specific parent support groups that involved families with children on the Autism spectrum, therefore the diagnosis of Autism was inflated in this sample. Child disability categories included Multiple Disabilities, Orthopedic Impairment, Learning Disability, Other Health Impairment, Speech or Language Impairment and Autism.

Table 10

Focus Group Participant Child Disability Classification (N = 20)

Disability	Frequency	Percent
Autism Spectrum Disorder	8	40.0
Orthopedic Impairment	1	5.0
Learning Disabled	1	5.0
Other Health Impaired	4	20.0
Multiple Disabilities	1	5.0
Speech or Language Impairment	5	25.0

Focus Group Procedures

Parents who provided contact information were initially contacted by phone or email (see Appendix C for phone and email text) to explain focus group participation. Once a parent expressed interest in participation, they were given four focus group times and two places from which to choose. Two of the focus groups were held in Round Rock due to the many families recruited from that area. The day before a focus group, parents involved in that focus group were phoned or emailed a reminder with the date, time, and location of their focus group. They were also provided with directions to the location and asked if they needed child-care. One focus group had four participants, two had five participants and one had eight participants. Seven of the twenty families utilized the offer for child care. Focus groups were scheduled for 75 minutes and were conducted in meeting rooms at the University of Texas and a Round Rock mental health center. When

focus group participants first arrived they were invited to get pizza and drinks, drop their child(ren) off and meet the child-care providers and return for a one-hour focus group on issues regarding special education involvement. Parents were informed of the audio-taping of groups, and their rights and responsibilities as participants. Documentation of consent was obtained from all focus group participants. Parents were asked to minimize the use of names.

The first focus group was the smallest with four members. This group consisted of two Hispanic mothers and two Caucasian mothers; some were more veteran and others novice. There were more statements about the effect of race during that evening than other sessions. One of the Hispanic mothers had become a parent advocate and there was additional conversation about her work with immigrant families. The second focus group had a Hispanic couple with three Caucasian mothers. The third focus group had one Hispanic participant and the last had all Caucasian and primarily veteran parents. The third focus group had the most men in one group with two fathers, one of whom had been a kindergarten teacher in a low socio-economic school setting. Table 11 presents individual focus group demographics.

Table 11

Demographics by Focus Group (N = 22)

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Race				
Caucasian	2	3	7	5
Hispanic	2	2	1	0
Gender				
Female	4	4	6	5
Male	0	1	2	0
Educational Attainment				
High School Graduate	0	0	2	0
Some Trade School/ CC/College	1	0	1	1
Associate Degree	2	1	1	1
Bachelor Degree	1	2	3	3
Some Graduate School	0	1	0	0
Disability Category				
Learning Disabled	1	0	0	0
Autism Spectrum Disorder	2	2	3	1
Other Health Impaired	0	2	1	1
Speech Impaired	1	0	3	1
Multiple Disabilities	0	0	0	1
Orthopedic Impairment	0	0	0	1

Note: Frequencies of parent demographic information not adding to respective groups totals reflect missing data.

The semi-structured focus groups were conducted using a list of questions (Appendix E) to guide discussion. This list used survey items (i.e. experiences with IEP

meetings and school relationships) as a framework for discussion. The facilitator asked as many of the questions as time would allow. Participants were encouraged to discuss personal attitudes and experiences, as well as beliefs or experiences they had heard about or witnessed. The conversations were somewhat different from group to group as different experiences from individuals guided conversation. Some groups were more energetic and self-directing than others, more frequently observed with young or novice parents. Questions were also adapted as parents in the first two groups brought up comments the facilitator wanted to follow up with other groups about (i.e. the 'problem parent' phenomenon).

Transcription Coding

Transcriptions of the three audio-taped focus groups resulted in 50 single-spaced pages of text. Statements conveying an opinion, behavior or experience yielded 692 natural language statements. For example, one mother expressing her novice experience and lack of orientation to special education said: "I am new to special education and I feel like they do not give you a good overview of what special education is." The purpose of the focus groups and qualitative analysis was to confirm patterns of data retrieved from 139 survey responses and to assist in establishing the construct validity of the SNS. Issues addressed by focus groups included racial and educational background influences on navigation efficacy, school involvement practices and emotional strain from involvement in the special education process.

Content analysis was used to qualitatively analyze parent statements from the four focus groups. During the first review, transcripts were read for statements about negative and positive feelings of efficacy. Transcripts were reread and statements which clustered around themes were coded with labels for categories derived from the literature (positive relationships with school personnel and impacts on efficacy). Coding of statements included establishing categories for topics that warranted discussion from multiple members involved in focus groups. Parents expressed opinions that fell under categories such as: special education is different and not equal, school staff lack knowledge and/or training, positive feelings towards school staff, emotional strain, system failure and differing values between home and school.

Groups of statements resulted in 44 initial categories (see Appendix L). These 44 categories were chosen from survey and focus group question categories, research literature and several preview readings of all transcripts. All statements were coded if they expressed an opinion or experience and new categories were created until statements exhausted categories. The 44 smaller categories were then brought together into themes and over-arching concepts developed from statements and reflective of research literature. The over-arching concepts were: Systems, Interactions with School Staff, Emotional Reactions and Experiences, and Mastery. Within each of the concepts there were two types of statements, one representing the positive nature of the theme and one the negative, yielding a total of 8 themes. For example, ‘Interactions with School Staff’ was one over-arching theme and included both positive and negative interactions with school staff.

There seemed to be a variety of ways in which this grouping could have occurred; one of the simplest appeared to be ‘self,’ ‘other/professional’ and ‘system.’ However, the chosen grouping system was determined to be the best demonstration of the construct being explored. In his development of this theory, Bandura (1977) determined the way to influence or teach efficacy was through performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal. These impacts on efficacy are nicely framed by the four concepts taken from this qualitative analysis.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS

QUANTITATIVE

Introduction

The main purpose of this study was to determine the effect of certain parent characteristics, including racial affiliation and educational attainment, on perceptions of efficacy navigating the special education system. This chapter discusses the results of analyses of data obtained from the survey utilized in this study. Data were analyzed for the proposed hypotheses. A discussion of results can be found in Chapter 6 and includes recommendations for future research and limitations of the present study.

Preliminary Data Analysis

Equality of variance was assessed prior to analysis and found to meet assumptions required for ANOVA. Levene's test of equality of variance was not significant (.880). Data collected were slightly negatively skewed [Skewness -.436, SE .2] but because the Skewness value is less than an absolute value of 1.0, and well below extreme levels of 1.5 or 2.0 (Lomax, 2001), no transformation was required as the Analysis of Variance is robust to this assumption. Overall, parents reported favorably high levels of efficacy across racial and education attainment groups. There was one outlier: a Caucasian parent with a graduate degree had the lowest overall total efficacy score.

Power Analysis

Prior to data collection a power analysis was conducted on PASS' online power calculator. Setting the effect size at medium (.28) and an alpha level of .05, this 2 factor (with two levels per factor) ANOVA yielded the requirement of 20 participants per cell (40 per independent variable). A total sample of 80 would be sufficient to yield a power statistic of .71.

After data were collected another power analysis was conducted using actual group sample sizes and means, and setting the effect size at medium (.3). A sample size of 128 respondents would be needed in order to achieve a power statistic of .80. Higher response rates were seen among non-minority racially affiliated participants, resulting in unbalanced cell sizes. Observed power for the main analyses was lower than expected and ranged from .05 to .14, and effect sizes were small and ranged from .002 to .006. Power statistics and effect sizes observed were very low. In order to see if the observed power would change given more subjects, the investigator doubled responses received and recalculated main analyses. There was almost no change in observed power. Either there are no real differences between these groups as measured by the SNS, there are no differences between the groups sampled or if results from this study were significant it is unlikely that they would be detected by this measure.

Quantitative Research Findings

Descriptive Statistics

Tables 12, 13, 14 and 15 display total efficacy score means and standard deviations by group for parent racial affiliation, parent educational attainment, child

receipt of free or reduced price lunch and child disability classification. Overall mean group efficacy scores were stable around 137 with standard deviations around 21.

Table 12

Levels of Efficacy by Parent Racial Affiliation (N=138)

	N	Mean	SD
Racial Affiliation			
African American	12	145.25	13.49
American Indian	1	102.00	--
Asian American	5	134.40	19.01
Biracial	3	109.67	14.01
Caucasian	94	138.96	21.16
Hispanic/ Latino	21	135.67	22.21
Other	1	95.00	--
Pacifica Islander	1	151.00	--

Table 13

Levels of Efficacy by Parent Educational Attainment (N=139)

	N	Mean	SD
Education Attainment			
No High School	1	122.00	--
Some High School	8	136.13	29.06
Completed High School	15	134.60	17.63
Some Trade School/CC/College	40	137.03	21.52
Associate Degree	16	134.81	23.87
Bachelors Degree	39	142.00	17.39
Some Graduate School	7	133.14	23.79
Graduate Degree	13	138.54	27.02

Table 14 presents mean efficacy scores for parents of children who receive a free or reduced price lunch. Parents of children receiving a free or reduced price lunch had lower mean levels of efficacy than their peers whose children were not receiving a free or reduced price lunch. Parent levels of efficacy by their child's disability classification are shown in Table 15.

Table 14

Levels of Efficacy by Child Receipt of Free or Reduced Price Lunch (N=137)

	N	Mean	SD
Receipt of a Free/Reduced Price Lunch			
Yes	28	131.82	21.76
No	109	138.74	20.80

Table 15

Levels of Efficacy by Child Disability Classification (N=135)

	N	Mean	SD
Disability Classification			
Learning Disabled	31	135.81	24.95
Mental Retardation	9	138.78	15.60
Other Health Impaired	10	135.40	28.25
Auditory Impairment	3	125.67	12.50
Emotional Disturbance	7	124.43	15.44
Visual Impairment	1	129.00	--
Orthopedic Impairment	3	143.33	2.31
Speech/Language Impairment	31	141.90	21.45
Autism Spectrum	35	136.86	19.39
Deaf-Blindness	1	157.00	--
Multiple Disabilities	4	152.50	12.40

For the purpose of analyzing the variance between groups of minority and non-minority racially affiliated and higher and lower educationally attained parents, data were recoded to capture the two levels of each of the two independent variables. Group cell sizes, and their means and standard deviations, are presented in Table 16. These numbers reflect relatively equal variances and means that are slightly higher for members of the non-minority (M= 138.96, SD= 21.16) and higher educationally attained (M= 139.04, SD= 21.14) groups. Table 17 shows the means and standard deviations of efficacy scores for different parent group combinations.

Table 16

Recoded Efficacy Scores for Groups of Interest

	N	Mean	SD
Educational Attainment			
Lower	63	136.11	21.30
Higher	75	139.04	21.14
Racial Affiliation			
Non-Minority	94	138.96	21.16
Minority	44	135.02	21.48

Table 17

Combined Group Mean Efficacy Scores

	Minority	N	Non-Minority	N
Lower Educational Attainment	134.12	25	137.51	38
Higher Educational Attainment	136.33	19	139.89	56

Test of Hypotheses

The two hypotheses for the first research question were tested using a two-way ANOVA where parent racial and educational group affiliation were the independent variables and total efficacy score (a sum of responses to the Efficacy Evaluation section of the SNS) was the dependent variable. The second research question was tested using Pearson's Product Moment correlation between low and high levels of efficacy (low ≥

one standard deviation below the mean) and parent report of IEP meeting attendance (survey items 18 and 33).

Test of Research Question 1, Hypotheses 1 and 2

Research Question 1 included two hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 predicted that parents with higher levels of educational attainment would rate themselves as having significantly higher levels of overall efficacy in special education related activities as measured by the School Navigation Survey. Hypothesis 2 predicted that parents who reported non-minority racial affiliation would rate themselves as having significantly higher levels of efficacy in special education related activities on the School Navigation Survey. To examine Hypothesis 1 and 2, a two-way ANOVA was conducted to determine the significance of the impact of educational attainment and racial affiliation on feelings of perceived efficacy in special education involvement.

There were no statistically significant main effects observed. Parents with higher and lower educational attainment did not differ significantly from each other [F (1, 134) = .334, p = .565] and parents reporting different racial affiliations did not differ significantly from each other [F (1, 134) = .764, p = .384]. The interaction effect of educational attainment by racial affiliation did not reveal statistical significance [F (1, 134) = .000, p = .984]. Results of the two-way analysis of variance did not indicate any statistically significant differences between groups and results from these analyses failed to support Hypotheses 1 and 2. Table 18 displays results from the two-way analysis of variance exploring the relationship between special education navigation efficacy and parent racial affiliation and educational attainment. Figure 1 illustrates the small

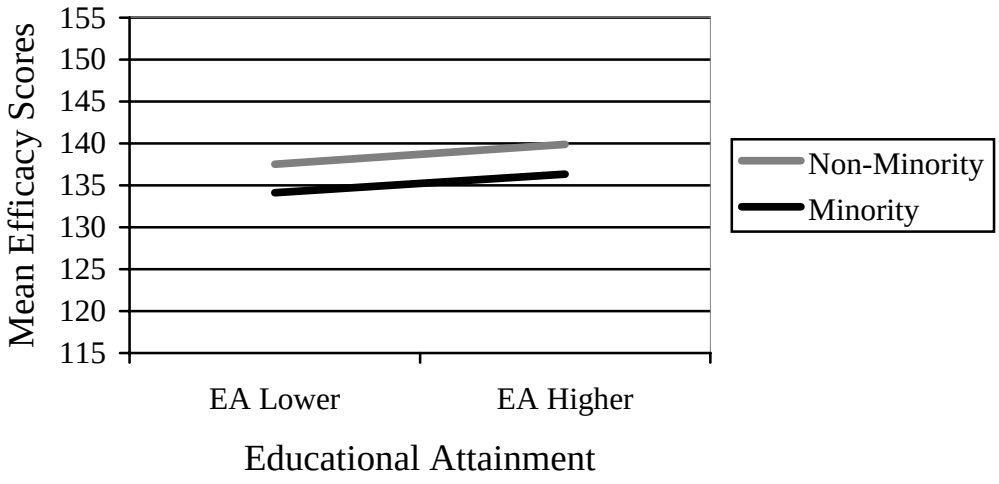
difference between group means. Though the tendency in this graph appears to support the original hypothesis, differences between means were not so pronounced as to yield statistically significant results.

Table 18

Results of Two-Way ANOVA for Efficacy Scores by Educational Attainment and Racial Affiliation

Source	SS	*df*	MS	F	*p*	η2
Educational Attainment (EA)	152.628	1	152.628	.334	.565	.002
Racial Affiliation (RA)	349.490	1	349.490	.764	.384	.006
EA x RA	.192	1	.192	.000	.984	.000
Error	61311.266	134	457.547			

Figure 2. Combined Group Mean Efficacy Scores for Participants with Higher and Lower Educational Attainment and Minority and Non-Minority Racial Affiliation.



Test of Research Question 2

The hypothesis for the second research question predicted that parents with the lowest overall efficacy scores would also report lower rates of IEP meeting attendance. To examine this hypothesis, Pearson's Product Moment correlation was used to determine the significance of the relationship between low efficacy and low attendance at school meetings. Two questions on the SNS addressed attendance at IEP meetings. The first question asked the parent to choose if they attended All, Some, None or The First of their child's IEP meetings. The second question asked if the parents attended all of his/her child's IEP meetings with a closed-answer yes or no response choice. The first question was recoded, with only the 'All' response considered a high attendance rate at IEP meetings. The second question was recoded and the 'Yes' response was considered a high attendance rate at IEP meetings (Question 1: All = 1, Some, None, and The First = 0; Question 2: Yes = 1, No = 0). High and low efficacy scores were also recoded. Cases with efficacy scores one standard deviation below the mean and lower were recoded as having lower overall efficacy (0) and average and higher efficacy scores were recoded as having higher levels of overall efficacy (1). Parent overall efficacy scores in the low range (≤ 116) were considered to be scores not in the average (117 to 157) or high range (≥158). Only a small group of parent respondents had lower levels of perceived efficacy (n= 20) as measured by this scale, slightly fewer than would be expected.

Results from the correlation between higher and lower efficacy scores and IEP attendance are shown in Table 19. The results of this correlation indicated only a small positive correlation between the two IEP questions [r = .278, N= 133, p = .001], leading

to concerns about parent response consistency. However, the first question had four responses ('I attend my child IEP meetings': All, Some, None and the First) and the second question forced parents to choose ('I go to all of my child's IEP meetings': Yes or No). Fourteen parents responded to the first IEP question with an answer other than 'All' (not including the six missing responses), however, when forced to choose an answer on the second IEP question all but three parents chose 'Yes' they attended all of their child's IEP meetings.

These two IEP attendance questions showed a weak but statistically significant correlation. As displayed in Table 19, parent report of attendance at IEP meetings on questions 18 and 33 had a non-significant relationship to levels of efficacy [r = -.070, N = 133, p = .423] and [r = -.061, N = 139, p = .476] respectively. Whether a parent had higher or lower levels of efficacy they were attending their child's IEP meetings.

Table 19

Intercorrelations Between Level of Perceived Efficacy and Individualized Education Program Meeting Attendance (N = 137)

	1	2	3
1. High & Low Efficacy (HLE)	---	-.070	-.061
2. IEP Attendance Question 1 (IEP1)		---	.278**
3. IEP Attendance Question 2 (IEP2)			---

Note. ** p < .01

Additional Analyses

Free or Reduced Price Lunch

An additional one-way analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of socio-economic status (as measured by report of child receipt of a free or reduced price lunch) on perceptions of efficacy in parent involvement in special education. Though the groups were unbalanced (receiving a free or reduced price lunch, N= 28 and not receiving a free or reduced price lunch, N=109) the ANOVA is robust to violations of this assumption and the Levene's test was not significant (.72). While the effect size was small (.02) and observed power was low (.34), these statistics were higher than detected in other analyses. The results of this test were not significant [F (1,135) = 2.422, p =.12]. This analysis did reveal a trend suggesting total efficacy scores of parents of children receiving a free or reduced price lunch were lower than parents of children not receiving this economic assistance. Results of this analysis are presented in Table 20.

Table 20

Results of One-Way ANOVA for Efficacy Scores by Child Receipt of Free or Reduced Price Lunch

Source	SS	*df*	MS	F	*p*	η^2
Between Groups	1067.304	1	1067.304	2.422	.122	.02
Within Groups	59496.914	135	440.718			
Total	60564.219	136				

Parents with Low Levels of Efficacy

In order to conduct the correlation between level of efficacy and IEP meeting attendance, total efficacy scores were recalculated into a new variable, High and Low Efficacy (HLE), with two levels of efficacy: lower levels of efficacy, and average and higher levels of efficacy. Characteristics of these twenty families were investigated further. These parents were 65% Caucasian and the breakdown of racial affiliation for this group was similar to the total sample involved in this study. Forty percent of parents with lower levels of efficacy reported higher educational attainment; this was lower than observed in total sample statistics. Thirty-two percent of parents with lower levels of efficacy reported their children received a free or reduced price lunch; this was a higher percentage than observed in total sample statistics. Of these 20 parents, 85% percent described meetings as difficult for them, 70% endorsed they become upset in meetings and 60% thought their child was in the wrong educational placement.

Seventy percent of the twenty parents with lower levels of special education navigation efficacy felt they had no control over their child's education ('agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with this item) – a hallmark of low efficacy. Seventy percent of these parents expressed feeling the stress of overseeing their child's education at home (80%). Many were upset by a perceived lack of follow up with IEP goals in the classroom (55%) and felt uncomfortable at their child's school (45%). Parents with low levels of efficacy have encountered difficulties educating themselves about their child's educational rights (60%) and diagnosis (45%). Additionally, these parents were frustrated by the amount of time they have spent working with the school to educate their child (55%) and have not

felt they were equal team members in meetings (60%). On a positive note, these twenty parents believed they can have a positive effect on the direction and success of their child's education (75%).

QUALITATIVE

"It was a very traumatic experience in early childhood, what are these acronyms and who are all these people and nobody sits down with you and explains these things, and it's not really logical either. It varies from school to school and district to district and state to state. Then, as I went on and on, it changed."

Introduction

The findings presented in this section are based on data collected from four focus groups (*N*=22). This study utilized focus groups in order to validate the School Navigation Survey and explore discourse about parent involvement in special education. Parents involved in focus groups expressed feeling that higher levels of education were a benefit to their efficacy in this process. Majority and minority parents expressed race worked to their benefit, though some parents expressed witnessing school professionals not treating minority parents fairly.

Focus group participants were educated, involved and motivated to travel and participate in research for a relatively small monetary incentive. Therefore, conclusions should be made with caution and may not be able to be generalized to other parents. However, themes and patterns from focus groups reflected those found in survey responses including positive relationships with school professionals impact efficacy, systems need to be effective and consistent to promote efficacy and negative emotional reactions and experiences decrease parent feelings of efficacy. Additionally, focus group statements reflected survey responses that parents are feeling they have positive interactions with professionals. Different racially affiliated parents in focus groups felt their race worked to their benefit. These varied parent expressions about race also reflect

survey findings that racial affiliation may not be a major moderator in perceptions of efficacy. Themes of parent group marginalization were not expressed in focus groups except vicariously. One parent expressed feelings of being marginalized. This parent was Caucasian and from a more rural area in central Texas. Parents in focus groups did however overwhelmingly respond that education was invariably an advantage.

Themes of parent discussion during focus groups included parents' expressions that their feelings of efficacy and levels of school-involvement have differed from year to year (17). Parents overwhelmingly assigned themselves the ability to positively impact their child's education. Parent responded both positively (18) and negatively (12) to questions about survey comprehensiveness. Positive responses included "I think it captured my feelings. What I wanted to say was in the questions." Other parents said it was "more that someone not from XISD was handing me the survey [and] I thought that would allow me to answer a little more honestly"; "[the survey] was very helpful … I wanted someone to be looking into some of the questions you were asking"; and "I felt like it addressed all my concerns at one point or another." One couple said "the questions were right on with us."

Responses that the survey did not capture their feelings included comments that general educators should get specific questions addressed about them and that there was not enough about student and teacher accountability in the survey. Some negative comments made about the survey were beyond the scope of the study. Many parents reported they were new to special education and desired more training in its topics (23),

including gaining a better understanding of the different options available for special education services in their district and for students with their child's disability.

Qualitative Research Findings

This section presents results of the content analysis of focus groups as they pertain to the main qualitative research question about the construct measured in this study. The following framework of concepts demonstrates how the theoretical construct of efficacy was reflected by the data. Parent discussions, grouped into four concept areas, focused on special education Emotional Reactions and Experiences, Interactions with School Staff, Mastery and Systems.

Emotional Reactions and Experiences

This theme included statements about emotional reactions and experiences in special education involvement. Emotional themes included anger, frustration, sadness and overwhelm. It also included perceptions about optimism and community support (derived from other parents and families). Parents made over thirty comments about emotional strain in the process. Parents remarked that when they were completing the survey they noticed different items triggered memories of which meetings went well and which were upsetting. Parents commented on the stress they experienced when they walked into meetings, feeling like they wish they could do more and being upset in or ending meetings. Parents also commented on the hope and joy they experienced from positive interactions with non-school professionals and community support. Other parents of children with disabilities were noted as a strong sense of solace for these parents. Some

parents seem to put undue pressures on themselves: “I think of another better mother in a foreign country who discovered something and think, why didn’t I do that?”

One mother commented on the every-day strain you deal with when your child has a disability and is in special education: “even when you are going into an ARD meeting when you know everyone is in agreement and you think it will turn out positively, it is still stressful.” One mother talked about layers of stress from her child, family and school:

> I think we have a very convoluted life, we have the pain of having kids like this, the extra work, the extra pressures on family, spouse, relationships and friends. It can also be a disabled school or a teacher is difficult or they don’t understand you and you don’t understand them. So, it can be more than your grief.

Another mother commented on how precious it is to meet another parent who knows what you are going through:

> I think getting validation is a big one. You’re treading along and you’re doing it, you’re doing what you think is right and it’s the only thing you can do and you meet someone…and they validate everything you’ve said…when you get that validation and you absorb it that is what I think keeps you positive and keeps you going.

Interactions with School Staff

This theme had the highest volume of statements and included comments about positive and negative relationships and interactions with school professionals. Comments

about negative school relationships included perceptions of intimidation, negative communication, and adversarial or litigious interactions. This category included expressions of feelings of distrust and perceptions of value mismatches between the family and the school. Additionally, statements made about hiring advocates to accompany parents to meetings were included in this category.

On the positive side, this category included statements about feeling welcomed by their child's school staff, being encouraged to actively participate in assessments and decision-making, being walked through the process, feeling informed and using personality or skills to get school staff to align with them. It also included parent perceptions of positive and open home-school communication, time and value considerations on the school's behalf and being in agreement about child placement. Comments were also made about how administrators help parents develop a deeper sense of community by promoting education and support for families of children with disabilities.

Parents discussed how they work or volunteer in the school community to develop relationships with school professionals working with their child. One father remarked that his daughter was at another school (not their neighborhood school) for PPCD and the teachers wanted to keep her there to monitor her progress in the first grade and he really appreciated the relationship that had developed and their commitment to his daughter. One parent commented that the best technique she could come up with was to become a substitute teacher and 'cut her deals' in the hallway when she was working.

Parents made a few more positive (85) than negative (78) comments about interactions with professionals. Parents commented on how positive validation from school staff motivates them and makes them feel more efficacious. Parents discussed how working in the system (substituting or volunteering) and 'working the system' (bringing cookies to ARD's) has allowed them to become part of the culture or create their own culture around involvement and helps them better navigate the system. One mom told a story about how one of her son's teachers offered to have her come in with her son and introduce him to his class and offer the class an opportunity to ask questions about his disability. This experience was a positive one for her and her son, and she felt more connected to the teacher.

On the negative side, parents remarked how they feel at odds with school staff and have different values for their child than school professionals. Some commented on the difficulty they have with defining their role in the process and how some are perceived as 'problem parents.' Some parents took the problem parent concept to another level, stating they felt professionals see their child as an extension of the parents and if their child is a behavior problem, then so are they.

Gender was described as important to efficacy in this process. Many comments (15) were made that school professionals are majority females and bringing a male figure into meetings changed the experience and the perception of a power differential. Several mothers in different focus groups stated that they brought their husbands to meetings in order to be taken more seriously by school personnel: "then my husband has a quiet, stoic personality and he's the muscle in the ARD, he just sits there…but when he's in the room

it's just a different meeting." Discussing vicariously the effects of gender, one parent brought up attending a support meeting where "another parent talked about when she brings her husband, they only talk to him."

About a successful ARD, one parent noted: "that was a really good approach…I don't think that is common, that it was a team effort. Sometimes it was like we were all in a huddle, working on stuff. It was very cool." One parent, in talking about her experience getting validation from certain members of her child's school staff, said: "because I am getting positive reinforcement from those other people, then I know I can stay the course and advocate for my son." One mother commented on becoming a problem parent by sticking up for what she believed: "I found out the teacher was not following the IEP and I very nicely brought my evidence and now to her I am the problem parent." Another mother commented on overhearing a teacher make a derogatory comment about her son:

> One particular teacher said – oh, I don't want him in my classroom—I was grateful to have heard that because, thank you—I don't want him in [your] class either…you're going to be the one to miss out on an experience you'll never forget.

Other parents felt mentored by professionals "Our PPCD (Preschool Programs for Children with Disabilities) teacher said…you are going to have to fight for your kids, and she started telling me all these things and saying 'you are going to have to know this'."

Mastery

This category included parent remarks about perceived competence in involvement practices and how they believe greater efficacy in this process is achieved. Parents

commented that positive levels of efficacy in the process would not be achieved by school information and positive school staff interactions alone. Some parents commented that their feelings have changed over time, for the better. These parents made statements about getting community advice and education (going to conferences) and going into advocacy work themselves to gain a greater understanding of the law, procedures and services. Other parents seemed to lack mastery and they discussed how their feelings have changed over time in a negative way. These parents expressed they could not get their child needed services, and some had children that were misdiagnosed and they felt they were making up for lost time. Others expressed feeling jaded and like no one would fight for their child but them. This category also included comments made about how age, race and education impacted their feelings of efficacy.

Veteran parents acknowledged that they had come a long way from when their child was first diagnosed and made remarks about what helped them develop a greater sense of efficacy in the process. Age, these veteran parents stated, was a precursor for efficacy in this process, in as much as older parents have more clout (especially when dealing with younger professionals) and that learning and confidence came with age and experience. Veteran parents also expressed they felt led through the process earlier on and have taken more action in recent years.

A few parents said that some optimism (discussed in the previous category) helped them keep a positive focus on involvement. They also stated that community advice from trusted parents and professionals and the ability to do research on disabilities, educational rights and interventions, helped keep them actively involved in

their child's education and improved their feelings of mastery in the process. Expressing knowledge about their child (including symptoms) to professionals and standing up for their beliefs, goals or values for their child's education also helped. Parents commented they learned to use their negotiation, business or social skills to help them accomplish their goals. One parent stated that parent personality and the values and ideals they hold for their child matter more than education or race. Other parents mentioned their education and knowledge about how to use the internet for research was helpful. In the same session, one mother stated that she believed being Caucasian has helped her, commenting on how she has turned down services from her affluent and predominantly white school and a Hispanic mother noted that she too feels her race helped her keep her child in a predominantly white school, citing she suspects her son brings in extra money from the state for being both Hispanic and classified under special education. Another parent said she had to get into the mindset for each meeting and would put on a power suit to go into an ARD. One parent who described treating school relationships like a business said:

> What I have learned to do with my kids is say: this is the research this is the decision and this is the educational reason. I back it up with things that they should know about development and the law. That's the only thing I have going for me, I have learned the lingo…you are here to educate my kids and I am here to make sure you do it.

One father commented on how education impacted his ability to detect and research what he perceived as a developmental delay in his daughter, while his peers with less education and similar issues with their child could not:

> Our child, since, from the moment we thought she had a problem at the age of two, we were doing something, because we generally had more education to see, or just turn on the computer and look it up, whereas the people that I knew, didn't.

A few preliminary findings from survey responses were presented to parents. Among them was a statistic that parents believed they were 79% effective in getting their child needed services in the past, but 92% of parents believed they would be successful in doing so in the future. To this discrepancy one parent said "I think it acknowledges a learning experience, more mastery, like 'I am not going to let that one slip by me again' you know."

Finally, similar statements were gleaned from parent responses to the open-ended questions on TEA's survey and this study's focus groups. Parents made comments about who they have gone to for good information, the importance of teacher training and the need for brief and easy to understand materials about their rights and special education procedures. Parents answering TEA's open-ended questions wrote about not wanting to be rushed in and out of meetings and how they desired parent trainings or an overview of special education, so they are aware of their options not just the placement, accommodations and modifications, the school wants to put in place.

Systems

This theme included parent perception of effectiveness of staff communication amongst themselves, staff training and the accessibility of important educational rights, disability and resource information. The opposite, ineffective Systems, included parent statements about bureaucracy, perceptions of school withholding of information or services, loss of needed services, mismatch between needs and available services and comments about failure or district funding as a criterion for receipt of services. This negative subcategory also included parent perception of implementation of procedures as inconsistent across schools and districts, and statements about how the new accountability structures are not seen as 'special education friendly', with the primary focus of administrators on becoming a 'blue ribbon school'. This category also included parent experiences with ineffective or effective interventions and assessments (i.e., computerized generation of IEP goals), high turnover rates among some professionals, perceptions that special education is different and not-equal education and recommendations for system changes. Other statements include observations of racism and classism and how that is evidence of ineffective and discriminatory system practices.

Parents made more comments about ineffective (115) than effective (51) Systems. Parents commented on how they had observed families that took their special needs child out of public schools and placed them in private schools. They discussed how schools seem to offer only limited remediation for certain disabilities. They commented on the deficient nature of the system that waits for their child to fail before modifications are made to their educational environment. Parents spoke about how their child is in a self-

contained class with children with very different needs. Parents noted that they felt "left in the dark" about why different types of services would be effective for their child's disability and unaware of what services their district offers.

Many parents remarked about the lack of parent friendly reading material (16). One mother called the educational rights information the school provided her an 'obvious CYA'. She felt the school could check off that it was provided but she did not understand what it all meant.

Parents also discussed how the system is changing and their children are less stigmatized than in the past. More positive (24) than negative (15) remarks were made about parent inclusion in the assessment process, through family history and rating forms, interviews and being observed in interactions with their child. Parents noted witnessing racism and classism (10). One father who had worked in an economically disadvantaged school said he noticed minority parents did not speak out in meetings, seemed intimidated and were led to believe that the school was doing its best. A Mexican American mother went into advocacy work after seeing a similar pattern in ARD meetings with Hispanic families. She witnessed diagnosticians being disrespectful and curt with families whose primary language was other than English. She added that "many of the families I work with are immigrants and have low economics and low education and many times they don't really understand the true extent of the decisions and the procedures." One Caucasian mother felt her son's race contributed to misguided early assessments:

> I think because he was a little white blonde boy with two smart parents, I think he was stereotyped, racially and academically… I thought it was so stupid that it

worked against him, they would say “but he’s so precious” and “oh, isn’t he cute.”

One Hispanic mother commented on her difficulty understanding the written information provided about her educational rights:

> To me, when you asked if they give you written information at all about disabilities or educational rights, yes they do. I mean they give you a paper but it took me a few years after reading it over and over and English is not my first language but I think I know the language and it took me a dictionary and asking and figuring out what it really meant.

Another mother commented on a difficult situation she witnessed involving another mother with a child in and out of eligibility for services: “one mom mentioned that she stopped an ARD that she felt was not going well… they bounced her son in and out of 504 and special education after each surgery… and this was doubly traumatic for him.” Commenting on the deficit model prevalent in schools one mother noted, “my son’s teacher last year and the speech pathologist both told me in no uncertain terms… when he fails, we will get him services.”

Summary

Hypotheses for Research Question 1 predicted that parents with higher levels of educational attainment and non-minority status would rate themselves as having significantly higher levels of overall efficacy in special education related activities as measured by the School Navigation Survey. These hypotheses were not supported by

data analysis. The second research question predicted that parents with the lowest overall efficacy scores would also report lower levels of IEP meeting attendance. No support was found for this hypothesis. This finding was not surprising given that the group of parent respondents were highly involved regardless of their feelings of efficacy in the process.

This chapter presented the statistical findings of the current study and provided more descriptive data for survey respondents, including the means and standard deviations of group efficacy scores. Statistical procedures and results from analyses of proposed hypotheses were reviewed. This study was concerned with the differences in mean levels of efficacy between groups of parents with regard to their educational background and racial affiliation. Statistically significant findings were not detected. Interpretations of these results are provided in Chapter 6.

Qualitative research questions included parent perceptions about the survey and the impact of race and education on feelings of efficacy. Parents commented on the comprehensiveness of the survey and negative comments about the survey did not directly relate to study questions. Parents in focus groups felt racial affiliation may be a benefit to those both minority and majority racially affiliated, however parents made several comments about observations of professionals treating minority racially affiliated parents unfairly. Participants in focus groups overwhelmingly ascribed a benefit to higher levels of parent education when dealing with this process, stating it has helped them do related research. The main qualitative research question involved the investigation of whether or not the construct of efficacy was being measured. Coding of qualitative data reflected the theoretical impacts on efficacy. Parent discussions focused on the

importance of direct experience, reduction of negative emotional arousal and the vicarious experience and validation gained from parents and professionals. Positive experiences in all four categories: Systems, Interactions with School Staff, Emotional Reactions and Experiences and Mastery may lead parents to improved feelings of perceived efficacy in the navigation of the special education system.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to evaluate perceptions of efficacy related to special education involvement for parents of children with special needs. This aim was achieved in part by examining the effects of racial affiliation and educational attainment on parents' perceived feelings of efficacy navigating the special education system. It was proposed that parents with more education and who were non-minority racially affiliated would indicate higher levels of efficacy. It was further proposed that parents with lower levels of efficacy would report lower IEP meeting attendance rates. An additional purpose of this study was to assess the psychometric properties of the exploratory measure used to examine parent perceptions of efficacy, the School Navigation Survey (Cloth, 2002).

Of the 700 questionnaires distributed, 139 parents returned the survey and of the 41 parents contacted, 22 parents participated in focus groups. The dependent variable used in quantitative analyses was an overall efficacy score. This score was the sum of self-report ratings on 35 Efficacy Evaluation items on the scale developed for this study. Parents who participated in focus groups discussed their experiences and perceptions of efficacy in their involvement in special education.

Quantitative and Qualitative Results

Results are based on participant responses to surveys (N=139) and focus group discussions (N=22). Parents involved in both phases of the study were primarily Caucasian and had high levels of education. Participants were recruited from schools and community support agencies, many of which foster parent involvement. The overall sample of respondents was homogenous and responses did not reflect a broad spectrum of parents with regard to race, SES, or child disability category. Parents of children with lower incidence disabilities and fewer community support networks (i.e., TBI) were not well represented in this study. Volunteer participants' positively biased survey responses suggest that involved and well-supported parents (i.e., those involved in school support networks or parent community agencies) have higher overall levels of efficacy in the special education process.

Racial Affiliation

Most survey respondents (110 out of 139) were parents of children attending schools ranging from 31% to 79% minority enrollment, the remainder came from community support agencies and parent conferences. Survey respondents did not reflect the diverse population sampled; the involvement of minority parents was quite low in comparison to the diverse pool of possible participants. Similarly, Grossman et al. (1999) had a low rate of return for their survey from the more diverse of the two schools used in their study (31% versus 60%). Parent respondents in the current study were highly involved in their child's education regardless of race and educational background.

Results from the main analyses indicated that efficacy levels were not significantly higher or lower for differently racially affiliated parents. Efficacy scores for minority participants were variable. Qualitative findings included minority and non-minority parents having positive perceptions of the effect of race on parent involvement and efficacy, parents from both groups expressing their racial affiliation was an advantage.

A Hispanic mother involved in one focus group stated that because her child was in a certain program within special education, they had the opportunity to attend another school and get a better education than she felt their neighborhood school delivered. Some non-minority parents noted benefits to their racial affiliation including attending affluent public schools. Several of these parents perceived their schools as overflowing with parent education and support options for families of children with special needs. However, one Caucasian mother expressed her experience with preconceptions or biases about her son, reporting she felt his disability was overlooked because of his race and parentage. Other minority racially affiliated parents expressed that race was neither a benefit nor a detriment in their experiences navigating special education. Focus group participants mentioned observations of the potential negative impact of race on involvement and efficacy. Parents involved in focus groups, who also worked in the system as advocates and teachers, observed rushed meetings punctuated by professionals speaking dismissively to parents and barriers to authentic involvement for minority parents consistent with research (Harry et al., 1995; Sosa, 1997).

Educational Attainment

Results from the main analyses indicated that efficacy levels were not significantly different for parents with higher or lower levels of educational attainment. This was in contrast to research conducted by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), Ritblatt, Beatty, Cronan, and Ochoa (2002), and others who found an impact of parent education on parent-school involvement practices (communication, familiarity and working collaboratively with schools) which falls under the umbrella of efficacy investigated in this study. The current study's findings may contradict the literature in this area due to the highly involved sample of parent respondents. Many parents were recruited from family support groups and agencies; parents involved in focus groups reported involvement in special education and district programming for families of children with special needs. Thus, this study found school-involved parents may feel effective regardless of their educational background.

Socio-Economic Status

An additional analysis examined the impact of socio-economic status on perceptions of efficacy in navigating the special education system. An analysis of the effect of child receipt of a free or reduced price lunch on levels of efficacy was not significant. However, a pattern was found which indicated continued research might yield a significant relationship. Parents of children receiving a free or reduced price lunch had lower frequencies of average to high levels of efficacy (68%) than parents receiving no economic assistance (86%). Socio-economics, and the complex familial and employment factors involved, may have an impact on parent feelings of efficacy in special education

involvement. This finding reflects literature reviewed on the effect of socio-economic status and income levels on perceptions of efficacy and levels of parent-school involvement (McNeal, 1999; Ritblatt, 2002; Singer & Butler, 1987).

Ethnicity, Education and Economics

Studies looking at parent involvement have detected differences between parent groups with regard to economics, education and racial affiliation. Studies reviewed which found differences between groups acquired samples with greater representation of minority parents (Gordon & Miller, 2003; Ritblatt et al., 2002) and used different procedures or measures (e.g., telephone surveys and interviews) (Gordon & Miller, 2003; Spann et al., 2003). Other studies investigated families in different types of geographical locations than the present study (e.g., rural or urban) (Gordon & Miller, 2003; Mathews, 1998). The current study did not detect any differences in mean levels of efficacy between groups with higher and lower educational attainment or differing racial affiliations. Though levels of efficacy were not significantly related to group variables, these results should be interpreted with caution due to the lack of responses from minority and less school-involved parents.

Studies have found mixed results on the impact of race and education on parent involvement. Discrepancies between parents' desired, perceived and actual school involvement were noted in parent involvement studies (Mathew, 1998; Wood & Baker, 1999). However, few differences were found across races when the analyses controlled for lower educational attainment. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) found that education positively affected involvement. However, the same study also found some

parents with higher levels of school-involvement and educational attainment still had lower levels of perceived efficacy in the process. This was also found to be true of a few parents in the current study. One Caucasian mother with a graduate degree had the lowest overall efficacy score of participants involved in the study. These parents may feel they should be able to exercise more control over their child's education or get their child the best possible services.

There is conflicting evidence about school communication practices differing across cultures and income levels. Some researchers say there are differences (McNeal, 1999) while others have found none (Ritblatt et al., 2002). One study found differences in parent ratings of school staff sensitivity and school familiarity across parent income levels (Ritblatt et al., 2002). However, income level (and marital and employment status), was not found to relate to level of efficacy in another study (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). In the current study, questions were asked about communication with professionals and an assessment of knowledge (of rights and resources) and these contributed to parents' overall evaluation of efficacy in special education involvement. Though parent perceptions of efficacy did not significantly differ between races or levels of parent educational attainment, there did appear to be a trend towards the possible impact of income on level of efficacy in special education navigation. This pattern may be due to lower levels of school familiarity and actual involvement (e.g., due to transportation or employment obligations). Findings from additional analyses conducted on SNS responses, as well as qualitative analyses from focus groups, suggests that socio-

economic status may be more strongly related to levels of efficacy in special education navigation than parent educational background or racial affiliation.

The present study found support for impacts on efficacy stemming from characteristics other than educational background and racial affiliation. Researchers have found that parent actions were more important in school readiness and achievement than parent level of education (Sylva, 2000) and teacher practices in school involvement may be more important than parent background (Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999). Factors in the current study found to impact efficacy reflect research in this area and include positive school relationships (Epstein 1987), lower levels of negative emotional arousal (Bandura, 1977), feelings of being valued (Grossman, 1999), and the ability to ask questions and participate in meetings. Parents involved in focus groups discussed the importance of being informed participants in the process, and how relationships with professionals and school staff made a meaningful difference in their perceptions of efficacy. Parents with positive levels of efficacy, drawn from experiences with accessible and clear information, positive and welcoming school environments and community support, may fare well in this process regardless of ethnicity, education or economics.

As discussed in the literature review section, the legal role and desired role for parent involvement in education and special education is not clean and clear across families. Concerns abound for families with educational, racial and economic differences. There is a subset of parents of children with special needs that want enough information to oversee their child's education and advocate effectively. There is another subset of parents who would respectfully leave that responsibility to school professionals. Still

another subset of parents do not view that actively overseeing their child's education is a possibility or a necessity (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). Accordingly, procedural safeguards should lie within the institutions rather than be left to parents who may be unaware of this expectation.

There is a conflict about how much parent involvement is appropriate and how much is optimal. Written-in responses to the survey used in this study revealed many parents perceive education as a dual responsibility between the home and school and this reflects Epstein's (1987) theory of coordinated educational efforts. Parent respondents to the survey had high levels of IEP meeting attendance. Parents involved in focus groups were outspoken about their desire for participation in the process and reported actively overseeing their child's education and advocating for their children. An important consideration for parent-special education involvement research and reform about the status quo: if parents do not take an active role in advocacy and involvement, children may not obtain appropriate services and have as positive an outcome.

Though no statistically significant findings resulted from this study of potentially marginalized populations, many studies have noted that mainstream cultural values are pervasive in schools (Harry, 1992; Lareau, 1996). There may be trust, familiarity and comfort issues for parents (Harry, 1992; Harry et al., 1995; Ritblatt, 2002; Sosa, 1997), as well as work, time, child-care and transportation related constraints (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Lareau, 1987; Sosa, 1997). These issues may have contributed to the lack of responses from specific groups of parents in the present study.

In addition to the constraints mentioned, other complex factors influencing involvement include parent personality, efficacy, culture, child age and disability, district, school and teacher characteristics, as well as other potentially ongoing family structure and societal changes. It is difficult to reconcile the intent and method of procedural safeguards if they are known and implemented by resourced and knowledgeable parents. A power differential, described by several focus group participants, may exist between parents and professionals, as well as between groups of parents.

The main research hypothesis for this study proposed that participants who had higher levels of educational attainment and were non-minority racially affiliated would have higher levels of perceived efficacy as measured by the exploratory scale. Qualitative and quantitative results showed variable perceptions of efficacy for individuals in the different groups. Quantitative results showed a slight positive bias in levels of overall efficacy for all groups, with levels of efficacy being favorable for parents surveyed. This study included many parents who utilized the resources in their communities, which resulted in high levels of observed efficacy. This variability and positive bias have been supported in the literature (Gordon & Miller, 2003; Spann et al., 2003). Results from focus group discussions suggest that higher and lower feelings of efficacy in this process may stem from parent characteristics and from neighborhood school and district orientations towards special education and family inclusiveness.

For a professional anecdotally familiar with the types of families who fight for services they believe their child needs, the question at the forefront is not only about the education, income level, or race of the parent but whether the parent would, by virtue of

their child becoming a member of a category of services, know that they need certain pieces of information and how to get assistance. It is important that parents know they are entitled to review their child's educational records and allowed to disagree with assessment results or placement decisions without extensive financial resources and without pulling their child from their neighborhood school. It is equally important to have knowledge and understand how to implement knowledge. To implement the knowledge involved in special education navigation, parents need information about how to execute procedural safeguards. In one focus group, the facilitator asked if parents knew how to get an advocate if they wanted one and parents had mixed responses. As Kunesh and Rose (1990) found, parent training and involvement practices should be considered an "ongoing commitment" (p. 4) on the part of schools.

Over half of the parent respondents to the survey came from a district that has developed a strong network for parents of children in special education. Round Rock ISD has two parent liaisons, volunteer parent representatives for many of its campuses and a parent support network that the holds regular parent educational and support sessions. These available services likely contributed to the frequency of average and high levels of efficacy in the navigation of the special education system observed in this study. Results from quantitative analyses showed no significant differences between mean efficacy scores of different educationally attained or racially affiliated parents. No interaction effects were observed or predicted because increases in educational attainment were seen as potentially beneficial for both minority and non-minority parents. The sample of school-involved parents may have contributed to the positively skewed and non-

significant results. However, these findings provide encouraging evidence that parents have improved skills in navigating the special education system when compared to results obtained from parents in similar studies conducted fifteen to twenty years ago.

IEP Meeting Attendance & Efficacy

Results from the analysis of data for the second research question, which investigated the relationship between parent IEP meeting attendance and level of efficacy, were not significant. Parent level of efficacy in the special education process did not correlate with parent IEP meeting attendance. Most parents sampled (90%) reported attending all of their child's IEP meetings. The vast majority of parents (95%) with low levels of efficacy in this process also reported attending all of their child's IEP meetings.

In this sample, 20 participants were categorized as having low levels of efficacy and the remaining 119 had average or high levels of efficacy navigating the special education process, as measured by the SNS. Low levels of perceived efficacy in the special education process appeared to stem from aspects of the process other than familiarity and involvement, including negative emotional experiences in meetings (70% 'agree' or 'strongly agree', versus 8% of average or high efficacy peers) and feeling that it is a struggle to get their child needed services every year (85% versus 16%). Parents with low levels of perceived efficacy felt their child had lost needed services (40% versus 9%) and experienced a change in their child's diagnosis (55% versus 36%). These parents felt their child's IEP goals were not actively being met (50% versus 9%), did not agree with assessment results (40% versus 4%) and did not feel their child was in the appropriate educational placement (55% versus 6%). Regarding school relationships,

parents with lower levels of efficacy felt they got along with their child's teacher at a lower rate than their average or high efficacy peers (55% versus 97%). Fewer of these parents had someone they felt comfortable talking with about their child's education at their school (45% versus 90%) and felt they worked in cooperation with their child's school to educate their child (65% versus 98%).

Participants' overall positive levels of efficacy, along with their high levels of IEP meeting attendance, suggest that school involvement may impact efficacy levels in navigating special education. An exploration of characteristics of this group indicated that negative feelings of efficacy stem from parent feelings of negative emotional arousal and conflicts with school professionals. Positive levels of efficacy appear to come from feelings of success and support, team membership, and positive school and community relationships, in addition to school familiarity and exposure.

The School Navigation Survey

The survey developed for this investigation had excellent reliability (α= .946). Focus group discussions indicated parents felt the survey was comprehensive and covered areas they believed to be important about the special education process. The scale was unidimensional and appeared to tap into the construct of efficacy (i.e. emotional arousal, direct and past experience, and external validation). This survey added a scale for the investigation of efficacy in special education system navigation to measurements used to examine the behavioral learning theory of efficacy.

Focus Group Findings

The sample of participants involved in focus groups was homogeneous and primarily consisted of school-involved, non-minority racially affiliated parents with high levels of education. Focus group participants did not represent a diversity of child disability categories and there was low participation among parents whose children receive a free or reduced price lunch. Seven families took advantage of the child care offered and all participants were provided a monetary incentive to participate. Participants came ready and willing to discuss the topics of inquiry. Many presented strong opinions about what has worked for them and what has not. Focus groups discussions revealed that many of these parents were not only highly involved in their communities, but some were leaders (special education newsletter and listserver coordinators), advocates, school volunteers and substitute teachers, who came into these roles after having children with special needs.

Four focus groups were held with a total of twenty-two participants. Parents involved in focus groups expressed feeling satisfied and dissatisfied with special education procedures and service provision, but many appeared to have strong perceptions of efficacy. Parents expressed strong beliefs about their role in their child's education and their educational goals for their children, whether or not they felt they had all of the information they needed or well supported by their child's school. Parents shared their perceptions of the survey, their relationships with school personnel and other experiences related to having a child with a disability.

Qualitative results from this study yielded important information about parent feelings and needs in this process (recommendations to professionals are provided in Appendix K). Parent responses to focus group questions suggest that positive school and community support, knowledge of the system and feelings of encouragement and being valued, helped foster feelings of efficacy in this process. Additionally, parents were interested in seeing an increase in the consistency of procedures and training to general educators about how to work with their children. Content analysis of transcripts revealed a high volume of statements about emotional experiences, the system of special education, support and encouragement from professionals and members of the community and what competence in this process entails. Participant discussions revolved around the different impacts on efficacy and an additional category—that of Systems—was developed to reflect the importance of discussions by parents about the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of the system of special education. Statements gained from focus group discussions suggest links between knowledge of the system and parent feelings of efficacy in the process. Findings, which demonstrate the importance of environmental support, experience, training and information, are in keeping with Bandura's (1977) sources of efficacy.

Several parents in the final focus group were known to the investigator because they were leaders in the parent network in their district. These veteran parents made comments about how direct experience fostered feelings of efficacy over time. They described how they were more apt to go along with school suggestions in earlier stages but became more active members and began to stand up for what they believe, as they

better understood the system and their child's diagnosis and needs. Other groups were a mix of novice and veteran parents. In one of these groups the investigator asked if they knew how to get an advocate if they wanted one. Two of the four parents attending that session said they did not know how to get an advocate. One of these novice parents remarked she wanted an overview of special education and did not know the programmatic options in her district for students with her child's diagnosis. Another parent's comments about the starkly different needs of children in her child's self-contained classroom touched on a systemic concern noted in Harry et al.'s (1995) research.

Some basic navigation skills and information were lacking among this group of highly involved and efficacious parents. One of the ways parents appeared to cultivate efficacy in this process was by asking questions of and learning from each other. Parents involved with family support groups knew trusted individuals to take their questions to, whether that was a professional or another parent.

Other Important Findings

The majority of parents responding to this survey reported receiving important information from their child's school. Parents in focus groups discussed how they relied on each other (parents with children in special education) to pass along good resources. Parents reported that their child's school kept them well informed about curricular, placement and assessment decisions (85%). Nearly all parents surveyed reported they received information about their educational rights (99%), and the majority of parents also received information about their child's diagnosis (90%). Results provide evidence

schools are complying with special education mandates, including parent involvement in IEP meetings and the distribution of educational rights and procedural safeguard information.

Seventy-six percent of parents felt they had been successful in getting their child needed services in the past and 91% felt they would be successful in the future. Parents involved in focus groups remarked on this discrepancy (evident from early preliminary data analyses and fairly stable throughout the study), saying it reflected their sense of hope and belief in their ability to learn and master the information needed to be successful in this process.

Ninety percent of parents in this study reported going to all of their child's IEP meetings. This was above the 80% average attendance rate found by Katsiyannis and Ward (1992) and the 88% from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (Newman, 2005). Understanding written information about educational rights was an issue raised by parents in focus groups. While nearly all parents involved in this study received information about their educational rights, it is important to note that one in four parents surveyed found it difficult to educate themselves about these rights. This finding suggests the written information provided may not be totally palatable to all of its recipients.

Other aspects of the system similarly hold parents at-bay. Researchers (Garcia, 2000; Harry, 1992; Harry et al., 1995; Lake & Billingsley, 2000) have noted a deficit model of language as a problem. There are also different cultural definitions of disabilities (Garcia, 2000; Harry & Anderson, 1999) and family definitions for appropriate development and behavior that may be wider than those established by

schools. Parents expressed a concern about the 'deficit model' in focus groups. The continuation of labels such as Emotionally Disturbed, were brought to light as warranting parent and professional concern. One parent involved in focus groups stated they did not identify with this negative and narrow label for their child. However, she did explain it was less disagreeable when one school professional told her that "being in school emotionally disturbs her child", because it felt to her like the deficit was placed on the school and not her child. Another concern raised by parents in focus groups about the system of special education included support for Herr's (1999) remarks about the inconsistency of the application of special education procedures. Parents reported it was confusing and changed from year to year and district to district.

While Autism spectrum disorders have a low rate of occurrence (2.4% in the state of Texas), the number of parents attending education and support groups for this disorder is high and they were well represented in this study (25%). Results of this study may be slightly biased towards the perceptions and opinions of this parent group. Some researchers have called for more investigations of culturally and linguistically diverse parents of children with developmental disabilities (Zhang & Bennett, 2003). The number of survey responses was relatively low from minority parents in this study (32%). Of the 35 who responded, 12 were minority parents (34%) of children with developmental disabilities.

Parent-School Involvement

The current study sought to extend the work by Coleman and Karraker (1997) on parenting beliefs and efficacy, as well as by Hoover-Demspey and Sandler (1997) and

Grossman et al. (1999) on parent-school involvement and efficacy, by exploring the construct of efficacy in parent-school involvement practices particular to special education. Involved parents appear to have high levels of efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997), but questions remain about how to encourage participation among uninvolved parents in order to build this efficacy. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) found a strong invitation from schools increases the likelihood of parent involvement. Results from the current study corroborate those findings. According to focus group and survey results, school relationships are important contributors to parent feelings of efficacy. Parents involved in focus groups noted the importance of feeling mentored and encouraged by school professionals. Quantitative results showed the vast majority of parents with higher levels of efficacy related well to their child's teacher (97%), had at least one person involved with their child's education with whom they felt comfortable talking (90%), and felt they worked in cooperation with their child's school to educate their child (98%).

Studies have also shown different types of parent-school involvement practices in the home and at school (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1987). Parents of children with special needs often have additional medical, psychological or diagnostic professionals they are working with and information they are absorbing. Parents in focus groups discussed establishing helpful relationships with informative professionals involved in their child's care. School culture and positive relationships with school staff have an impact on school involvement (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1987; Harry, 1992; Mapp, 2002) and an important effect on parent perceptions of efficacy when navigating

the school system (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Parents consistently reported, both via survey responses and qualitatively in focus group discussions, the importance of having a relationship with at least one person involved in their child's education. For this reason, teacher and school professional practices are important.

There are issues particular to parent involvement for diverse families. Some include barriers mentioned (e.g., logistical and attitudinal), and others include the beliefs parents have about their role in educating their child and how they view their child's disability. As Kalyanpur et al. (2000) stated and other researchers (Harry, 1992; Harry et al, 1995; Lareau, 1987) have found, "equity in this process conflicts with the hierarchy of professional knowledge" (p. 122) and some parents defer expertise to school professionals out of respect. Though parents in focus groups expressed they could speak forthrightly about their opinions and desires for their children, they also commented on observations of those they believed could not. One mother commented on her work with immigrant families and the curt nature of professionals working with them. Another father remarked that the underserved families in the low-income school where he worked were treated negatively and not encouraged to participate in school meetings. The various incentives offered to participants in focus groups attempted to eliminate some of the barriers that typically exist for parent involvement in activities (i.e., childcare).

There was a low level of involvement by participants who were economically, educationally and racially diverse. Many focus group participants had children with disabilities for which there is a high level of support provided within the communities studied. This may indicate these parents were more connected to resources than is typical

of all parents of children with special needs. Focus group participants were vocal about their ability to present their opinions to professionals, stating they do not choose to defer to school staff decisions and judgments at all times. Most survey respondents were also higher educationally attained and majority racially affiliated. Given the high number of educationally, economically and racially diverse schools included in this study, the response rates indicate the barriers to parent involvement previously discussed (e.g. time constraints, language/literacy, value mismatches and beliefs about education or their role in school involvement) may be implicated in the involvement of diverse families in this study.

Limitations of Parent-Involvement Research

Results that demonstrate satisfaction with special education and positive feelings towards school involvement practices for parents cannot always be taken at face value (Gordon & Miller, 2003; Spann et al., 2003). Studies have found parents report high levels of satisfaction with special education services on surveys but little specific information to support their satisfaction (Spann et al., 2003). Though Spann and colleagues (2003) found parents reported moderate levels of satisfaction with home-school communication (82%), a moderate amount of knowledge about their child's IEP document (78%) and the IEP process (73%), 44% of these parents said their child's school was doing little or nothing to address the needs of their child. High levels of satisfaction with the special education process were also noted in TEA's (2004) parent satisfaction survey, though some more negative feelings and experiences were reported in open-ended responses.

As Wood and Baker (1999) found, parents report higher levels of interest in involvement than actual involvement. Parents in this study, similarly, may report higher levels of efficacy than may be accurate. This sample of parent respondents reported a high level of involvement in school meetings, which may not accurately reflect the larger population of parents of children in special education. Parent involvement research often occurs where parent involvement is encouraged (Gordon & Miller, 2003).

Role Construction

An additional and dynamic factor important to understanding parent-school involvement for parents of children with special needs is that of role construction. Grossman et al. (1999) discussed role construction as an area where parents feel valued and important. Parent role construction in this process can also stem from beliefs a parent has about their role in parenting and educating their child (Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

In a study exploring role construction in activities related to school involvement, Hoover-Dempsey and Jones (1997) found that parent emphasis on parent-focused (the education is the parent's responsibility) or partnership-focused (the education is a partnership of parent and school responsibilities) behaviors were associated with higher levels of child achievement than parents who emphasized school-focused behaviors (leaving education up to the school). Lareau (1987) related this type of framework to social capital. She found that working-class parents relied on the teacher to educate their child whereas middle class families monitored their child's education and "behave in a way that mirrors the requests of schools" (p. 82). Lareau and others have emphasized that

parents construct their role and approach overseeing their child's education with different resources. Epstein (1987) also addressed the difficult question of role construction in parent involvement practices in her theory of home and school, individual and shared educational responsibilities.

While the intent of the survey was to gauge parent feelings of efficacy in the special education process and not to define parent role construction in specific activities, this concept was addressed by several survey items. One item ('it is the school's responsibility to ensure my child is taught correctly') received conflicting support and numerous write-in responses. In keeping with findings about the importance of the parental role in education (Epstein, 1987; Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997), 16 of the 139 parent respondents wrote in a response to the effect of "both mine and theirs." These parents expressed their partnership-focus (Hoover-Demspey & Jones, 1997). This was the only survey item to receive consistent write-in remarks. Another item on the survey addressed the concepts of efficacy and role construction ('I believe I can have a positive effect on the direction and success of my child's education'). This necessitates an assessment of a parent's sense of efficacy and their role in their child's education. In response to this item, the majority of parents (94%) endorsed believing they can have a positive effect on the direction and success of their child's education. This belief has been found to affect parent involvement practices (Ardelt & Eccles, 2001; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Hill & Taylor, 2004), and the alternative negative belief has been found to interfere with parent accomplishment of goals (Coleman & Karraker, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Survey items that addressed role construction included one that did not

have a strong item-total correlation ('I am able to help my child with academic work at home'). Several other items explored Grossman's et al. (1999) conceptualization of role construction, by looking at the importance and value placed on parent involvement. Findings included parents felt they were an important part of the assessment process (91%) and an equal team member (81%), encouraged to participate (89%) and able to ask questions (82%) in school meetings.

The concept of role construction was of concern to parents and the issue was raised in focus group discussions. Parents discussed feeling the need to be an expert and an advocate, to bring food to meetings to ease a difficult experience, or to wear a 'power suit' to school meetings. These strategies and ways of coping also reflect a power differential discussed by parents in focus groups and evident in the literature (Harry, 1992; Harry et al, 1995; Howe & Miramontes, 2002; Kalyanpur et al., 2000). This power differential was perceived by parents as information or service withholding by schools. Possession of information and balance of power are linked to perceptions of efficacy and role construction (Bennet & DeLuca, 1996; Herr, 1999).

Parents involved in focus groups also discussed becoming friends with people involved with their child's education, while others reported treating these relationships like business. This determination appeared to be linked to parent personality and expressions of their likelihood to use charm and friendliness, or the research and the law, to get their child needed services. Other parents, employed by schools, mentioned cutting deals with other school professionals as colleagues. Still other parents described their

need to advocate, and to learn enough to effectively advocate, for their child. Role construction is an area worthy of continued exploration.

Qualitative results from the present study revealed differences in values, language, personalities and control of resources as areas of potential conflict. These findings support those discussed in Lake and Billingsley's (2000) research. Parents involved in focus groups commented on the feeling of having services or information withheld from them, dealing with difficult school professionals, their attempts to mutually construct goals for their child and feeling alienated by the written materials provided to them about educational rights. Areas of potential conflict revolve around the balance of power and parent role construction confusion in this process. Differences that arise undoubtedly impact parent feelings of efficacy (Herr, 1999).

Implications for Theory, Research and Practice

Implications for Theory

Results from this study provided support for Bandura's conceptualization of sources of efficacy. Both qualitative and quantitative results demonstrate the impact of stress, accomplishments and support on feelings of efficacy. This information may help school professionals more fully understand how to educate and assist parents in order to boost their levels of efficacy in this process. Parents in focus groups communicated a desire for increased information about special education procedures and services. Parents with lower levels of efficacy, as measured by the SNS, reported negative emotional experiences (i.e., stress, becoming upset in meetings) more frequently than parents with

higher levels of efficacy. These parents also felt they needed more information and better relationships with schools. Thirty percent of parents with low levels of efficacy reported not being aware of community resources. Parents require decreased levels of negative arousal, increased exposure to procedures and information, feelings of success and encouragement, and community support in order to foster their perceptions of efficacy in navigating special education.

Research has explored parent role construction in parent-school involvement (Epstein, 1987; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Parent roles, and their perception of their roles, change with new legislation and variations in family structure and child developmental stage. This was evident in focus group discussions of veteran parents expressing high levels of knowledge and efficacy in their involvement in the special education system. Parent involvement may also change in response to school professionals' focus on high stakes accountability efforts. School relationships and family-school involvement are changing in relation to these societal and political changes. Parents in focus groups noted a principal's focus on becoming a "Blue Ribbon" school did not always match their values of educating and meeting the goals of their child with special needs. Administrators who prioritize high stakes testing and accountability procedures may be in conflict with parents and professionals whose priorities lie with the individual needs of special students who are not always participating in these procedures.

Research suggests there needs to be a continued recognition of the importance of parents on schooling, schools on home and after-school practices, and of shared home and school responsibilities (Epstein, 1987). Findings from this study indicated that many

parents believe educating their child should be a shared responsibility. Parents desire information to take a role as an effective team member and believe they can have a positive effect on the education of their child.

Implications for Research & Evaluation

Similar to other studies on parent-school involvement, this investigation found it difficult to tease apart what factors have an effect on parent efficacy in special education parent-school involvement. It may be important to study parents with lower levels of efficacy and both parent and school staff perceptions at one time to see what variables work together to encourage or discourage special education parent-school involvement and efficacy. Additionally, it would be interesting to research the characteristics of parents who take districts to resolution sessions or due process hearings to see if they are systematically higher educationally attained or higher income parents.

Public education is one of the last great bastions of free democracy and tax dollars at work for the betterment of society. Action and survey research should take place in the schools, capturing stakeholder voices and translating their needs and voices into public information to shape reform. Ongoing research and evaluation in schools can help professionals reflect on procedures and the responsiveness of practices (Harry, 2002), as well as develop appropriate programming (Epstein, 1996). Recommendations gained from parent involvement studies like the present one should be implemented to determine their effectiveness.

Implications for Policy

There were no statistically significant findings in this study. Rather, the important findings from this study included the observation of high levels of efficacy for school or community involved parents and the variability in levels of efficacy among and within the different groups studied. This variability was evident in focus group discussions and may be reflective of system variability and inconsistencies, at the school and district levels, of the implementation of various special education procedures (i.e., the IEP meeting, child assessment, services offered and IEP goal implementation). This inconsistency has been noted in the literature (Herr, 1999; McLoughlin, Edge, & Strenecky, 1978). Bandura (1977) stated that discrepancies between efficacy expectations and actual levels of efficacy are likely to arise when task requirements are ambiguous. In order to best serve parents and the intent of the mandates of their participation, professionals need to inform parents about school services, child diagnoses and educational rights, as well as provide consistent delivery of services and information. The quality of the implementation of these policies should be assured and evaluated (Appendix K provides some suggestions to assist with the implementation of this assertion).

This study provided encouraging evidence of compliance with special education mandates and the growing perception and recognition of the importance of parent involvement in special education related activities. Still more changes are needed to reflect a care and concern for parents with regard to the clarity and wide dissemination of more useful materials about the process and community resources. With professionals

and parents waiting for commissioner rulings on the proposed reauthorization of IDEA, it is difficult to say how much will change in terms of parent involvement in this process. Some changes to regulations involving parents include additions to the definition of parent, policies on professionals able to be excluded from IEP meeting attendance, procedures for redress of grievances and resolution sessions, issues of parental consent and neighborhood schooling policies (Federal Register, 2005). Policy leaders need to consider if the procedural status quo requires that parents know more than the professionals educating their child in order to achieve best practice service implementation for the education of their child.

Schools need to ensure that parents have the information they need to be discerning partners in the oversight of their children's education (Katsiyannis & Ward, 1992). However, parents should not be expected to ensure professional due diligence. Teachers, especially general educators, are being pulled in multiple directions. Teachers are required to focus on state mandated assessments, while implementing behavior intervention plans and IEP goals, alongside general curriculum instruction.

It should not be assumed that all parents have access to the same information across cultures, and education and income levels (Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Lareau, 1996). It is the school's responsibility to educate and inform parents about programming options and procedures (Gordon & Miller, 2003) and to co-construct meaningful and responsive goals (Harry, 1992; Zhang & Bennet, 2003). Parents lack information about programming, rights, and district and school services (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). It is important to disseminate parent-friendly materials that encourage authentic and

efficacious education team membership (Dembinski & Mauser, 1977; Gordon & Miller, 2003; Green & Nefsky, 1999). Parents reported needing additional community resources and information about transition services in the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002). Findings from qualitative analyses of focus group data showed parents need an overview of the special education process, information on how to implement procedural safeguards and information on useful community resources related to their children's diagnosis.

Implications for Practice and School Professionals

Results from this study have important implications for practice. Researchers have found a relationship between parent beliefs and parent involvement practices (Grossman et al., 1999; Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997). School professionals have the opportunity to encourage parent practices by enhancing parent beliefs about their value and importance in the process, and by teaching them necessary skills to be effective in their involvement practices.

Findings from parent involvement studies are especially important with the upcoming re-authorization of IDEA, and legislation and court precedents laying the groundwork for the next generation of parent-involvement practices in general and special education. It is important to understand the complexity of parent-school involvement, especially as it pertains to parents of children with disabilities. The valid implementation of IDEA (LRE and FAPE) requires informed parents to be working collaboratively with diligent professionals. It is the responsibility of school professionals to inform parents about procedures, options and services and gather pertinent information

from parents about their knowledge of their child's strengths and weaknesses, and about their values and goals for their child's education. Quantitative results from this study suggest parents were involved in their child's assessment process (91%). Qualitative results found parents had mixed reviews about their involvement in assessment procedures, stating they had both negative (17 statements) and positive (26 statements) experiences.

One phenomenon that was discussed in several focus groups was the concept of the "problem parent" (and the "problem teacher"). This, along with the school phenomenon of "errors of omission" or school withholding of information (Davies, 1999; Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1999; Herr, 1999), needs to be quashed in order to open up the system that often holds parents in a subservient position. Parents and teachers may feel anxiety about the efforts required for authentic collaboration (Epstein, 1996). Parents and teachers involved in a negative interaction cycle may consider reformulating their relationship out of concern for the education of the involved child. It is vital that procedural safeguards for special education include parent ability to seek (and easily find) information about their rights.

School professionals can empower parents while teaching them about the limits and reality of public school services. It is important that professionals send both verbal and non-verbal messages encouraging parent involvement in schools. Parents with low levels of efficacy on the SNS and parents involved in focus groups reported on the impact of difficult relationships with professionals. It is also important for professionals to consider the impact of diagnostic labeling when individual cases are not clean and clear.

Results from this study may impact policy and practice. Districts may consider mandating a system to monitor the quality of parent-school relationships. It may also be worthwhile for regional education service centers to select schools with lower levels of parent involvement for training on ways to bolster parent involvement. An additional mandate may be to disseminate an overview of special education procedures and a list of helpful community (and school and district) resources to families at the outset of their child's referral for services and at annual IEP meetings. If professionals are willing to give parents 30 pages of IEP goals and reports, a few more pages of useful information will not overburden families.

Research conducted on parent education programs can utilize what is known about parent practices in school-involvement and incorporate needs of parents of children with disabilities. Parents responding to a survey regarding parent education programs (Wood & Baker, 1999) reported an interest in attending fewer than four sessions or independent drop-in education trainings held between five and nine in the evening, offering child care. Parents should be involved in the input for topics for training. Seventy-six percent of parents involved in the present study endorsed they would attend a school meeting educating them about the special education system. This was similar to other findings on parent desires for training and additional written information (Kunesh & Rose, 1990).

This study's confirmation of Bandura's theory of impacts on efficacy also has important implications for the focus and content of parent education programs about special education. Influences on efficacy include accomplishment or direct experience,

vicarious experience, persuasion and emotional arousal. In the current study, these sources also included information about the special education system. Parent assistance and education in special education may include environmental support (a source of persuasion and encouragement), vicarious experience through community involvement (knowing other parents in similar circumstances and hearing their stories), focus on individual goals (accomplishment), and reduction of negative emotional arousal (through the provision of training or advocacy). Education programs for parents about special education procedures may include IEP meeting role-plays and observations of role-plays. This type of exposure may help lessen anxiety and negative emotional arousal during actual meetings (Shapero & Forbes, 1981). Programming may provide education and training about the special education system, services and procedures. Parents may also need education on school and grade transitions (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002), or on educational trajectories and school requirements if they are interested in community college or college for their child with special needs (Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1999). Other types of programming may include education on estate planning, specific diagnostic categories and informational presentations by community support agencies. Results of this study suggest it would be beneficial to include district mandates for a parent liaison or special education district or school representative who is able to discuss procedures and provide information, encouragement and support.

Study Limitations

Limitation of Design and Procedures

The first limitation of this study involves family literacy and language. Though responses from high diversity and low education background populations were desired, they were difficult to obtain given the constraints of an English-language survey. Generally, there is also a low response rate for mail surveys, which provide a self-selected sample.

Often parent involvement research occurs where parent involvement is supported (Gordon & Miller, 2003). Though the investigator obtained approximately 25 surveys from different school districts, most surveys came from the two suburban districts that approved the study and allowed schools to be involved in the mass distribution of the survey. The means of distribution of surveys to schools may have impacted who responded to the survey. With regard to school distribution of surveys, the investigator left the surveys in the hands of school professionals as opposed to the parents themselves. Schools may not have properly distributed the surveys, and children may have left the surveys at school or not given them to their parents.

Another limitation of mail surveys is sampling (Fowler, 2002). Respondents were a homogeneous and specific sample. Most respondents had more education than the general population, were Caucasian and did not have children receiving a free or reduced price lunch. This sample had positively biased high levels of efficacy and was a volunteer, self-selected sample of parents. It is likely that their responses do not reflect both the population as a whole and those who did not return surveys. Specific subgroups

of parents responded to the survey; primarily parents of children with Autism, Learning Disabilities and Speech Impairments. Findings from this study may have been affected by the particular perceptions of parents with children in these disability groups, as well as others including Other Health Impairments (for ADHD), that have more support systems in place in the community (including parent support programming and national organizations like CHADD) than other types of disabilities such as Traumatic Brain Injury, who may be more isolated.

Low overall percentages of minority responses for a study in part about minority perceptions was the major concern for this study. Attempts were made to gather responses from diverse groups of parents. Many of the school professionals in schools used for mass distribution of the survey were majority racially affiliated. The use of cultural brokers in this type of research may increase responses from diverse racial groups. The survey was not translated to Spanish and this too was a limitation of the study. The investigator does not speak or read fluent Spanish, and translation was beyond the scope of the study. In addition, the investigator would not be able to adequately oversee accurate database set-up and data entry for these responses or conduct any focus groups in Spanish to validate the measure.

Limitation of Qualitative Data Collection

Another limitation of this study was bias during focus groups. Although the investigator attempted to keep her opinions at bay, venting or complaining parents could move the culture of even a temporary system towards their biases. The bias visited most frequently was the “failure of the system” to accommodate for their individual children.

Limitation of Measurement

There were also limitations with the scale used for measuring efficacy in this study. The SNS was an investigator-designed measure that attempted to assess the construct of navigation efficacy in parent involvement in special education activities. Skewed results and the variability observed within the groups studied may have been a limitation of scale construction and sampling. Respondents included an outlier (2.76 standard deviations away from the overall mean), a Caucasian graduate degree holder, who had the lowest total efficacy score. Another limitation that may have skewed results is that of social desirability in responses.

In order to improve the measure, items with low item-total correlation should be removed from the instrument. Items that may enhance the instrument could be added to look more directly at concepts of interest like role construction, and to acquire additional information to determine if parents know appropriate procedures to implement their educational rights (e.g., to see if they know how to acquire an advocate or request school records). New factor and reliability analyses should be conducted after item additions or subtractions.

Recommendations for Future Research

To advance the research undertaken in this study, a confirmatory factor analysis may be conducted when enough responses are received, after which analyses for main effects should be recalculated. Additionally, items loading below .4 should be dropped from the scale (Garson, 2005). Analyses should include a new calculation of Cronbach's

alpha reliability coefficient. A future study may also determine the scale's predictive validity.

Another follow up to this study might include continued data collection from low income families to determine the significance of the impact of socio-economic status on feelings of efficacy. Additionally, future studies might include surveys in languages other than English. The investigator's skill and financial limitations resulted in difficulty recruiting uninvolved and diverse parents. Researchers fluent in other languages should undertake similar studies with Spanish and other languages. It is vital to understand cultural perceptions of the process and parents' perceived and desired roles in special education involvement. It may be most beneficial to monitor these practices through interviews with parents who have low literacy skills. Investigators may wish to consider enlisting the help of cultural brokers within systems being studied. They may be helpful in approaching participants and increasing diversity of involvement in this type of research.

The responsibility for the implementation of IEP goals, and for family-school inclusion and school culture change, largely rests with school administrators and teachers. It would be valuable to conduct a study of inclusiveness practices of teachers and administrators in special education as accountability structures in schools have changed in the last ten years, while different responsibilities in special education have become mandates. Data collection regarding school practices may wish to include parents and school staff. This systems level evaluation could investigate how schools effectively promote authentic parent-school involvement and student inclusion (and the laws set

forth by IDEA/EHA of FAPE and LRE) in the era of high stakes accountability. It may be worthwhile to study high and low parent involvement schools to determine programming that enhances or detracts from parent involvement. Also, an in-depth investigation into the redress of grievances process for a sample of districts may be helpful in determining if parents raising complaints belong to certain groups of socio-economic, educationally attained or ethnic backgrounds.

It would be beneficial to conduct a study on the impact of special education training on parent level of efficacy utilizing measures at pre and post-training. The field of parent involvement and special education research would gain important information from a longitudinal study documenting the change in parent level of efficacy over time and child development. This type of study could solicit recommendations from veteran parents of children with special needs regarding policies to assist the next generation. Finally, for a study like the present one, it would be interesting to follow up with parents who reported lower levels of efficacy in order to explore what affects their involvement practices and what may foster higher levels of efficacy. What is true for these parents may be true for many others.

Appendix A
School Navigation Survey

Survey Code:

TO RETURN SURVEYS:
Please mail surveys back in the self-addressed stamped envelopes provided OR drop it off in your school's office in the box marked UT Research in Special Education. THANK YOU!

School Navigation Survey

For Parents of Children Classified Under IDEA in Public School

Developed by Allison Cloth, M.Ed., 2002©
Doctoral Candidate in School Psychology
University of Texas at Austin

I am willing to be contacted about taking part in a local, one-hour focus group about these issues (participants in these groups will be compensated for their time). If not, please do not provide the information below (this page), but PLEASE fill out and submit this survey!

_____

Name Email Address Phone Number

School Navigation Survey

Complete this form ONLY if your child is attending a public school.
Complete one form per child.
All answers will be kept private & are not tied to a name or identification.

Background Information

School District:

1. Child: Male Female
2. Grade:
3. Age:
4. Parent Taking Survey: Male Female Both
5. Does you child receive a free or reduced price lunch? YES NO

Race (please circle):

1. African American
2. Hispanic/Latino
3. Asian American
4. Caucasian/White
5. American Indian
6. Biracial
7. Pacific Islander
8. Other: _____

Classification under which your child is *currently* receiving special education services (please circle):

1. Learning Disabled
2. Mentally Retarded
3. Other Health Impaired
4. Auditory Impairment
5. Emotional Disturbance
6. Visual Impairment
7. Orthopedic Impairment
8. Traumatic Brain Injury
9. Speech/Language Impaired
10. Autism Spectrum
11. Deaf-Blindness
12. Multiple Disabilities

Parent Education (please circle the highest level of completed education of the parent filling out this survey):

1. No School
2. No High School
3. Some High School
4. Completed High School
5. Some Trade School, CC or College
6. Associates Degree
7. Bachelor's Degree
8. Some Graduate School
9. Graduate Degree

Is your child in Public School full-time (If Not, DO NOT Fill Out This Survey):

All Special Education classes.	YES	NO
All General Education classes.	YES	NO
Part Time (PT) General Education and PT Special Education (i.e. resource/ content mastery).	YES	NO
All General Education with no extra help.	YES	NO
All General Education with some extra help.	YES	NO
Does your child receive additional services (e.g. Speech, etc)?	YES	NO
Not receiving any current services.	YES	NO
Others in our family have had similar school problems as my child in special education.	YES	NO
I would attend a meeting at school to learn more about the special education process.	YES	NO
Do you attend your child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) /ARD meetings?	All	Some The First / None

Questionnaire

In the first section please circle 'YES' or 'NO' to indicate your answer. For the second section use the scale provided to answer each question. Circle the number that represents your response. For school questions please answer about your relationship with one child's *current* school, teacher (main teacher) and educational experience. Please fill out a new survey for each child in special education. If you feel a question does not apply to you please choose 'Neutral'.

Referral, Assessment & Placement Background

1. My child has problems with schoolwork.	YES	NO
2. My child needed to be tested to find out more about his/her academic problems.	YES	NO
3. My child should be in special education.	YES	NO
4. I agree with the results from my child's assessment.	YES	NO
5. I was told what tests my child was given in order to determine the nature of his/her academic problems.	YES	NO
6. I was interviewed or asked (or filled out a form) about my understanding of my child's strengths and weaknesses.	YES	NO
7. My child's diagnosis has changed since his/her initial assessment.	YES	NO
8. My child's teacher tried things to help my child in the classroom before referring him/her for a special education assessment.	YES	NO
9. My child's school has taken away services I feel he/she still needs.	YES	NO
10. My child's IEP goals are reasonable.	YES	NO
11. My child's IEP goals are actively being met.	YES	NO
12. School personnel have answered my questions in meetings.	YES	NO
13. I know the secretary at my child's school.	YES	NO
14. It is the school's responsibility to make sure my child is taught correctly.	YES	NO
15. I go to my child's IEP meetings.	YES	NO
16. I met the person who tested/evaluated my child.	YES	NO
17. My child was tested in his/her native language.	YES	NO
18. I received written information about my child's disability.	YES	NO
19. I received written information about my child's educational rights.	YES	NO
20. My child's main teacher listens to my concerns.	YES	NO
21. School administrators (e.g., principal or school psychologist) listen to my concerns.	YES	NO
22. I have brought an advocate to an ARD meeting (or meetings).	YES	NO
23 I am aware of the resources in my community for parents of children in special education (e.g., Family Support Network and Family Center).	YES	NO

Efficacy Evaluation **(Please circle one number to indicate your answer. Please continue onto the back.)**

1= Strongly Disagree (SD)
2= Disagree (D)
3= Neutral (N)
4= Agree (A)
5= Strongly Agree (SA)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I am an equal team member in school meetings about my child.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I understand how the decision was made to place my child in special education.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I know my child's educational rights (e.g., to a Free and Appropriate Education, a fair assessment and my right to contest results).	1	2	3	4	5
4. I feel encouraged to participate in my child's IEP/ARD meetings.	1	2	3	4	5

	SD	D	N	A	SA
5. I am able to ask for what I believe my child needs from his/her school.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Meetings with school personnel are hard for me.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I am frustrated by the amount of time I spend working with my child's school to help serve him/her better.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I am upset that my child's teacher may not be following through on my child's IEP goals in the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I feel like I have no control over my child's education.	1	2	3	4	5
10. The time and energy I spend with school personnel working on my child's education, is worth the effort.	1	2	3	4	5
11. There is (at least) one person at my child's school I feel comfortable talking to who is involved in educating my child.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I get along with my child's teacher.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I work in cooperation with the school to educate my child.	1	2	3	4	5
14. My child's school is considerate of my time and (personal and professional) obligations, making this process easier for me.	1	2	3	4	5
15. Dealing with my child's education produces stress at home.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I am actively involved in my child's education.	1	2	3	4	5
17. It is upsetting for me to be in school meetings.	1	2	3	4	5
18. My child's school has done its best to keep me informed about all testing and placement decisions.	1	2	3	4	5
19. My child is in the right educational placement.	1	2	3	4	5
20. I feel welcomed by my child's school.	1	2	3	4	5
21. I am able to help my child with academic work at home.	1	2	3	4	5
22. I have seen other parents cope successfully with the activities involved in the special education process.	1	2	3	4	5
23. Dealing with my child's education is frustrating for me.	1	2	3	4	5
24. I am uncomfortable going to my child's school.	1	2	3	4	5
25. It is easy for me to get my child the education he/she deserves.	1	2	3	4	5
26. I am able to stand up for my/my child's rights in this process.	1	2	3	4	5
27. Other parents have more success with this process than I do.	1	2	3	4	5
28. It has been difficult for me to educate myself about my child's learning problems/diagnosis.	1	2	3	4	5
29. It is a struggle for me to try to get my child the help I believe he/she needs at school every year.	1	2	3	4	5
30. It has been difficult for me to educate myself about special education rights, procedures and special education related services.	1	2	3	4	5
31. I have been successful getting my child school services he/she needs in the past.	1	2	3	4	5
32. I expect to get my child what he/she needs to be successful at school.	1	2	3	4	5
33. If I knew more about the special education process I may try harder to get my child services at school.	1	2	3	4	5
34. It is easy for me to take an active role in my child's education.	1	2	3	4	5
35. I believe I can have a positive effect on the direction and success of my child's education.	1	2	3	4	5

Thank you!

Appendix B
Short Consent

Short Consent Form

Title: Parent Navigation of the Special Education System
University of Texas IRB Study Number: 2004-07-0013
Conducted by: Allison Cloth, M.Ed., (512) 659-7860, alicloth@mail.utexas.edu
Faculty Supervisor: Margaret Semrud-Clikeman, Ph.D., (512) 471-4407
The University of Texas at Austin, Educational Psychology Department

Dear Parent,

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The person in charge of this study is also available to answer any further questions you have about participating in this study. Please read the information provided and ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to take part. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Deciding not to participate in this study will not in any way affect your future relationship with the University of Texas at Austin. You can stop your participation at any time by not returning the survey or by telling the person in charge of this study (Allison Cloth, information above).

The purpose of this study is to gather information about parent attitudes, opinions and experiences with navigating the special education referral and placement process.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- Read this information consent form.
- Fill out and return the enclosed or accompanying School Navigation Survey.
- If you would like, you may also provide your name and contact information at the bottom of the survey so the person in charge of this study may contact you for participation in a follow- up, one-hour focus group. Participants will be paid for their participation in the focus group. Providing your contact information is entirely voluntary and you may (and are encouraged to) submit the survey even if you do not wish to provide that information.

Estimated time for participation in filling out the survey is approximately 20 minutes.

There are no direct risks or benefits in participating in this survey and there is no compensation for filling out the survey.

The surveys and records of this study will be coded and stored securely and kept private. Authorized persons from the University of Texas at Austin and members of the Institutional Review Board have the legal right to review research records and will

protect the anonymity of those records to the full extent permitted by law. All publications will exclude any information that would make it possible to identify you as a subject. If you have any questions about the study please direct them to the researcher, Allison Cloth, whose name, phone number and email address are listed above. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant please contact Clarke Burnham, Ph.D., Chairman of the University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (512) 232-4383.

You may keep this form for your records.

I have read the above information and have sufficient information to make a decision about participating in this study. To consent to the survey (only) portion of this study please simply return the survey to the researcher, Allison Cloth by mailing the survey in its self-addressed stamped envelope. Thank you for your participation!

Appendix C
Telephone and email text for focus group recruitment

Phone Script

Hi, my name is Ali Cloth and you filled out a survey recently about how parents navigate the special education system. I am using that survey for a research project. If you recall there was a space at the bottom of the survey that asked whether or not you were willing to be contacted regarding a follow up focus group about the survey. You did provide your information telling me you were willing to be contacted regarding the focus groups I linked to that survey. Is that still the case?

If no, ok, thank you for your time and for filling out the survey.

If yes, well, that's great, thank you. Let me tell you a little more about it and you can decide whether or not you are able or want to participate. I am the principal researcher for this study and I am looking forward to getting about six parents together in each focus group. It will last approximately one hour and you will be paid ten dollars for your time. Focus Groups will be held at the University of Texas at Austin and the Bluebonnet Trails MHMR in Round Rock. And participants will be asked to discuss their opinions and experiences with the topics covered by the survey you filled out (examples: ARD meetings, assessment process). These sessions will be audio taped so that I may transcribe and read them, but no names will be attached to what people have said (and if I use quotations in anything written about the study, I will not use people's real names, so you remain anonymous). Is that something you would be interested in? And, do you have any questions?

If no, ok, I appreciate you taking the time to listen and thank you anyway. Take care and goodbye.

If yes, great. I will be holding four sessions you can participate in. The times are: 6:00-7:15PM on May 16, 17, 25 or 26. I will have pizza and child-care will be provided in an adjoining room. Do any of those times work for you? And, do you have any questions?

If no, ok, I will try to come up with a few more dates with UT or MHMR Round Rock and get back to you. I can be reached at (512) 659-7860 if your plans change and you'd like to get in touch. I will call you back if I am able to negotiate more times for space. Thank you for your time. Goodbye.

If yes, great, do you mind if I take down your home address or an email address (if not already provided on the survey) so I can send you a reminder invitation (or I will send you a reminder email to the email address you provided on the survey- read it- is that the

correct address?). Also, I can be reached at (512) 659-7860 if you have any questions. Thank you for your time and I look forward to meeting you! Goodbye

Email Text

Dear parent,

Thank you for taking the time recently to fill out the School Navigation Survey about your involvement in the public school special education process. My name is Allison Cloth and I am a graduate student in the School Psychology Department at the University of Texas at Austin. On the front page of that survey there was a space where you provided your information indicating your willingness to be contacted about participating in a follow-up focus group. I am hoping you are still willing to participate. There will be four focus groups to choose from and hopefully you will be able to attend one of them. If you are unable to attend any of the times provided but would still like to participate, let me know and I will try to set up a fifth alternate date and time. The group will last an hour and fifteen minutes, there will be child-care (two fellow school psychology graduate students) and pizza, and you will be paid ten dollars for your time. During the hour-long discussion, you will be asked to talk about your opinions and experiences with the topics covered in the survey. The group discussion will be audio taped so that I can transcribe and read the discussion, but no names will be included in the text. I am the principal researcher for this study and I am happy to answer any questions you may have about the study or the survey and focus group.

The first two focus groups will be held in the George I. Sanchez Education Building at the University of Texas at Austin (Corner of MLK and Speedway). We will meet in at Room 254. The latter two focus groups will be held at the Bluebonnet Trails MHMR facility in Round Rock.

All groups will be from 6:00 PM to 7:15 PM

Monday May 16, 2005 George Sanchez Building, University of Texas at Austin, Rm 254
Tuesday May 17, 2005 George Sanchez Building, University of Texas at Austin, Rm 254
Wednesday May 25, 2005 Bluebonnet Trails MHMR, Round Rock
Thursday May 26, 2005 Bluebonnet Trails MHMR, Round Rock

Please let me know which (if any) focus group time you are able to attend and how many children will accompany you. Also, let me know if you need a map to the location and I will send one to you. I will send you a confirmation email about the focus group date you are scheduled for and, the day before the focus group, I will email you a reminder invitation. I can be reached at (512) 659-7860 or this email address if you have any questions. Thank you for your time and I am looking forward to meeting with you.

Other reminder letters:

Dear x,
Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in the follow up focus group about parent involvement in public school special education process. As I mentioned our phone conversation/ in the previous email the focus group will be an hour and fifteen minutes long, there will be child-care and pizza, and you will be paid ten dollars for your time. During the hour-long discussion, you will be asked to talk about your opinions and experiences with the topics covered in the survey you filled out. The group discussion will be audio taped so that I may transcribe, read and analyze the discussion.

You are scheduled for the focus group on:
May 16, 2005 *George I. Sanchez Building, University of Texas at Austin, Room 254
May 17, 2005 *George I. Sanchez Building, University of Texas at Austin, Room 254
May 25, 2005 ** The Bluebonnet Trails MHMR in Round Rock
May 26, 2005 ** The Bluebonnet Trails MHMR in Round Rock

Which is at:
*The George I. Sanchez Education Building at the University of Texas at Austin, Corner of MLK and Speedway and we will meet in Room 254.

**The Bluebonnet Trails MHMR in Round Rock. Flyers on the door will tell you which room we are meeting in.

We will meet from 6:00 PM to 7:15 PM

If you find that you are unable to make the time I have scheduled you for, let me know as soon as possible. The day before the focus group, I will email you a reminder invitation. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at (512) 659-7860 or this email address. Thank you for your time and I look forward to meeting you!

Dear x,
This is a reminder email that you are scheduled for the focus group tomorrow night at 6PM at the x location. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me at 659-7860 or this email address. I look forward to seeing you then! Ali Cloth

Appendix D
Long Consent

Focus Group Consent Form

Title: Parent Navigation of the Special Education System
University of Texas IRB Study Number: 2004-07-0013
Conducted by: Allison Cloth, M.Ed., (512) 659-7860, alicloth@mail.utexas.edu
Faculty Supervisor: Margaret Semrud-Clikeman, Ph.D., (512) 471-4407
The University of Texas at Austin, Educational Psychology Department

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The person in charge of this study is also available to answer any further questions you have about participating in this study. Please read the information provided and ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to take part. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Deciding not to participate in this study will not in any way affect your future relationship with the University of Texas at Austin. You can stop your participation in the focus group at any time.

The purpose of the focus group is to learn more about parent opinions and experiences with the special education referral and placement process addressed on the School Navigation Survey.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- Read and sign this consent form.
- Have a discussion with a few other parents about the survey you filled out and the topics it covered (such as the assessment of your child for special education and your involvement in the Admissions, Review and Dismissal or ARD meetings). Participants will be asked to comment on approximately eight questions.

The focus group will be one-hour long and you will be paid ten dollars at the end of the focus group in appreciation for your participation.

There are no direct risks or benefits in participating in this survey (more than expected in everyday life). However, you will be audio-taped so the researcher is able to transcribe and review comments made by participating members of the focus group.

Confidentiality:

- Focus Groups will be audio-taped.
- Tapes will be coded so that no personally identifying information is visible on them.
- Tapes will be kept in a secure place (e.g., a locked file cabinet in the investigator's office).

- Tapes will be heard only for research purposes by the investigator and her associates.
- Tapes will be erased after they are transcribed or coded.

All research materials will be coded and stored securely and kept private. Authorized persons from the University of Texas at Austin and members of the Institutional Review Board have the legal right to review research records and will protect the anonymity of those records to the full extent permitted by law. All publications will exclude any information that would make it possible to identify you as a subject. If you have any questions about the study please direct them to the researcher, Allison Cloth, whose name, phone number and email address are listed above. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant please contact Clarke Burnham, Ph.D., The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (512) 232-4383.

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

I have read the above information and have sufficient information to make a decision about participating in this study. To consent to your participating in the focus group please sign below. Thank you for your participation!

Signatures:

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

_____

Signature and printed name of person obtaining consent Date

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this Form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

_____

Printed Name of Subject Date

_____

Signature of Subject Date

_____

Signature of Principal Investigator Date

Appendix E
Focus Group Questions Guide

Focus Group Questions

Some focus group questions will depend on parent responses to survey questions and themes that arise form those responses. A final list of questions will be submitted to the IRB after an initial analysis of the surveys.

1. Talk about how you were engaged by school personnel to give some information about your child during the assessment phase of your child's evaluation for special education services.

2. How did you (if you did) go about informing yourself about your child's diagnosis or classification under IDEA (e.g., LD, Autism, etc).

3. How did you (if you did) go about informing yourself about your child's educational rights (e.g., Free and Appropriate Education, Fair Assessment, etc.).

4. Talk about your experience in your first ARD meeting.

5. Talk about your experiences in subsequent ARD meetings.

6. How did you/ do you feel about the new relationships with school personnel that came with your child being referred for special education services (e.g., a diagnostician or a specialist).

Follow up: have there been certain relationships that have been more helpful than others?

7. Talk about how you are treated in ARD meetings by school personnel.

8. Did this process produce stressors and how you have managed them.

9. Do you feel you are working in collaboration with your child's school to educate your child?

10. How welcoming (of your presence, questions and collaboration) do you feel your current school is?

11. How well do you feel the survey assessed your experience with the process and, are there any issues that were not addressed by the survey that you felt were important to your experience (will hand out a blank survey as a reminder)?

12. How do you feel about your ability to navigate this process (do you feel you are more confident and have an easier time with it or, do you find yourself more frustrated and struggling with it)?

13. How do you feel your educational background has played a role in (or impacted) your experience in the special education referral and placement process?

14. How do you feel your race or ethnic identity has played a role in (or impacted) your experience in the special education referral and placement process?

Appendix F
Data Collection Log

Date	Place
February 1, 2005	Coffee Meeting, Family Support Network, Round Rock Independent School District, Round Rock, Texas (no data collected- just attended)
February 28	Family Support Network Meeting, Round Rock Independent School District, Round Rock, Texas
March 1, 2005	Coffee Meeting, Family Support Network, Round Rock Independent School District, Round Rock, Texas
March 8, 2005	Special Education Campus Representatives Meeting, Round Rock Independent School District, Round Rock, Texas
March 29, 2005	Social Competence After-School Research Group, School Psychology Dept., University of Texas at Austin.
March 31, 2005	Autism Support Group, Brook Hollow Elementary, Pflugerville ISD, Pflugerville, Texas
April 3, 2005	Autism Conference, Thoughtful House Center for Autism, Omni Hotel, Austin, Texas. Distributed packets to parents.
April 5, 2005	Coffee Meeting, Family Support Network, Round Rock Independent School District, Round Rock, Texas
April 5, 2005	Six letters were delivered to RRISD principals, with UT/RRISD approval and Survey packets. Three approved: Central TX 1, Central TX 2, Central TX 3.
April 7, 2005	Put letters to parents of each school in packets and distributed to Central TX 1 (115), Central TX 2 (85) and Central TX 3(60). One principal said it would take them two weeks to get out to families.
April 8, 2005	RRISD, Special Education 'Vertical Meeting' gave packets to professionals to give to parents.
April 12, 2005	Austin Family Support Cooperative, Rosedale Elementary, Austin, Texas. Attended CHADD's Regional Meeting, and a PDD/Autism and Downs Syndrome parent support groups. Distributed packets.
May 16 & 17, 2005	Focus Groups at UT, Austin, TX (4 & 5 participants respectively)
May 25 & 26, 2005	Focus Groups at Bluebonnet Trails MHMR, Round Rick, TX (8 & 5 participants respectively)
June 20, 2005	Kipp Academy College Prep (25), Austin, TX
November 7-10, 2005	Lewisville Approval (9/25/05). North TX 4 (some distributed by the Diagnostician, to those he knows are English speaking), North TX 1 (96), North TX 2 (124) and North TX 3 (74).

Appendix G
TEA Survey

See http://www.esc9.net/survey/parent_survey_a.htm for Texas Education Agency's Parent Satisfaction Survey.

Appendix H
IRB Approval

This study's original, amendment and continuing review approval letters are on file with the University of Texas at Austin's Institutional Review Board in the Office of Research Support and Compliance.

Appendix I
Letters to principals

Allison Cloth, M.Ed.

Name, Principal
Blank Elementary
High School Drive
Lewisville, TX 75057
Phone:

Dear Principal,

My name is Allison Cloth and I am a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin in the School Psychology Department. I am currently working in the Lewisville School District as a Psychology Intern for Special Education Services. I am also working on my dissertation, which is exploring parent involvement in special education. I have developed a survey, enclosed, which looks specifically at parent feelings of self-efficacy in the special education related activities and relationships parents become involved with on behalf of their child(ren) with disabilities. Also enclosed is a copy of the consent form that accompanies the survey to parents. I am specifically looking at differences between groups of parents with regard to their educational background and, racial and socio-economic affiliations.

I am writing in hopes that I may be able to gain access to the families of children receiving special education services in your school so I may ask them to take my survey. For parents who agree to take the survey it would take (primarily English speaking parents) approximately fifteen to twenty minutes to fill out.

There are a couple of different ways I could attempt to involve families in your school:

- I could supply you or your special education director within the school with a certain number of surveys, consent forms and self-addressed stamped envelopes and you could mail them out or hand them out to parents or have children bring home to their parents.

  or

- I could attend an event at your school where I could hand out the surveys directly to families of children in special education (e.g., conference or PTA nights) and talk with them about the study if they had any questions.

This study has current approval from both the Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas at Austin and the Lewisville Independent School District (see enclosed approval letters). I appreciate your consideration and thank you for your time. I believe this is a

worthwhile study, which will help illuminate the areas of strength and weakness in current special education service delivery and family inclusiveness.

I am specifically targeting schools with more diverse families/students because I am very much hoping to get opinions and attitudes about this topic from a diverse group of parents with children in special education. I hope an alliance with your school is possible and would provide me with an extension of the diversity of respondents I am seeking. I would make sure to minimize any amount of effort or time on your and your staff's part. Thank you for your time and I greatly appreciate your consideration. Feel free to contact me via the information provided above.

Respectfully yours,

Allison Cloth, M.Ed.

Appendix J
Approval Letters from Round Rock ISD & Lewisville ISD

August, 23, 2005

Jo Haney
Executive Director of Special Education
Lewisville Independent School District
Special Education Services
400 Main Street
Lewisville, Texas 75057

Dear Dr. Lisa Leiden,
The purpose of this letter is to grant Allison Cloth, a current psychology intern with our district and a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin, permission to conduct research with parents of children receiving special education services in the independent school district of Lewisville, Texas. Allison's project "Navigation Efficacy Among Parents of Public School Children Classified under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)" (UT IRB #2004-07-0013) entails asking parents to complete a brief survey (School Navigation Survey ©). Schools willing to take part in the study will be given surveys and consent forms in self-addressed stamped envelopes for distribution to all children receiving special education services in the school. The purpose of Allison's research is to explore parent feelings of efficacy in the activities that surround special education parent involvement. Allison is seeking approximately 40 more participants through this district. LISD is granting permission to Allison to conduct her research in (willing) schools in LISD, this letter allows her to permission to contact Principals within the district to attempt to get schools on board.

Sincerely,

Jo Haney
LISD, Executive Director of Special education

This is a rewritten copy of the original approval letter which was too light to reprint. The primary investigator has a copy of the original with signature on file.

Department of Assessment and Research
16255 Great Oaks Drive Suite 800
Round Rock, Texas 78664

Phone: 512 464-5039

March 29, 2005

Ms. Allison Cloth
The University of Texas at Austin
Department of School Psychology
1 University Station D5800
Austin, Texas 78712

Dear Ms. Cloth:

Please be advised that your request to conduct a research study in the Round Rock Independent School District (RRISD) is approved. The title of your research is "Navigation Efficacy Among Parents of Children in Public Schools Classified Under The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)". Your research topic is of interest to educators.

This letter of research approval will serve to formally acknowledge permission for you to proceed with the proposed research study. I understand that you have already made preliminary contact with campus administrators and they are aware of your research study. I encourage you to let them know that your research application has been approved.

The Assessment and Research Office continues to guard and safeguard the valuable limited time that our students, teachers and principals have to participate in research activities; therefore, we ask that you be sensitive to this issue.

We hope that you will be able to conduct your research successfully and we wish you the very best in your efforts.

Sincerely,

Raymond Canizales
Director of Assessment and Research

Appendix K

Recommendations to School Staff and Administrators

- District in-service training for all school personnel should include information about where to direct families for special education questions, evaluations and referral information (including information about district/community support groups and education/training).
- In-service training for special educators, educational diagnosticians/assessment specialists and school psychologists should include family inclusiveness training (with special consideration to differences in involvement practices relevant to different cultures and income levels) and give these educators the ability to provide a synopsis about district special education service options.
- Districts administrators should commit to hiring an appropriate ratio of culturally and linguistically diverse assessment specialists (and other related service personnel including special education counselors and where possible, school psychologists) to match population statistics of the students and families in the district.
- More communication and time with parents at the outset will support less confusion, animosity or adversarial relationships later. Holding district-wide parent training meetings each year about special education (or community services), including information about how to go through the referral, evaluation, placement process would be beneficial, especially for families new to special education. All special education (including ECI) parents should be informed about this meeting through neighborhood school advertising. Parents new to special education require time to learn about its services and procedures.
- Assessment specialists and school psychologists can encourage attendance at a special education training meeting for new special education families every year by following up reminders with phone calls to their contact families. These professionals are integral to developing and facilitating ongoing parent-school communication.
- Small acts make big differences. Knowing one person involved in their child's education or getting along with their child's main teacher helped strengthen parent feelings of efficacy in this process (according to responses on the SNS). Appointing a school professional as each family's contact person will provide a mentor relationship but will also divvy the load for professionals. In order to spread the load- more professionals (general *and* special educators) should have training in special education system navigation.
- Maintain a standard to minimize paperwork to parents and that paperwork include as little jargon and technical/legalese as possible (Harry et al., 1995). Parent handouts (even including parent legal rights or federal mandates) should be broken down into small comprehensible parts, of decent font size, in lay-person terminology.
- Define IEP goals in keeping with family values. Ask parents about their concerns, goals and values for their child's education. Parents' everyday knowledge of their

child is important to the assessment of the child. Utilize the expertise of parents. Make cultural assumptions explicit and co-construct child goals (Harry, 1992; Kalyanpur, Harry & Skrtic, 2000).

- It may serve parents well to tell them to monitor their child's self-esteem or moods after they are placed in special education. Some children have difficulty acclimating to change or (those in inclusion settings) may have negative feelings about being out of their 'regular' class and need to be supported and encouraged. Also, parents may want to monitor the general progress their child is making and ask themselves if it matches what they were told to expect or what they desire for their child.
- Encourage advocates or family member attendance instead of that presenting adversarial feelings (Green & Nefsky, 1999). Encourage parent-to-parent support efforts.
- Promote cultural awareness and knowledge among those working in special education. Hire culturally diverse staff reflective of the population of the school (Green & Nefsky, 1999).
- Expand school outreach efforts to culturally diverse families (Wood & Baker, 1999).
- For districts with high levels of racial/ethnic diversity, utilize parent liaisons which reflect and honor that diversity.
- Present factual and open-ended information and ask opinions to promote participation in IEP meetings (Green & Nefsky, 1999).
- Lessen the formality of IEP meetings. Half of the paperwork does not need to be heard by parents and confuses them. A more parent friendly meeting should be held with parents and a more school staff and bureaucratic meeting should be held later.
- Schools need to maintain a standard that all school personnel on a child multi-disciplinary team are informed of the child's IEP goals (have a copy of them) and are actively implementing them and are assisting in their attainment.
- Districts should have staff representatives at the campus or district level that parents can go to with inquiries or process training. If the district does not have the money to staff this type of position ask a veteran special education parent to volunteer. Teachers and other special education contact personnel can help bridge informational and cultural differences. These parents should reflect school diversity and as much as possible speak languages representative of parents in the neighborhood school.
- Plan school and district-wide family/parent activities with input from diverse cross-section of parents concerning their needs in parenting, disability information training, curricula and school policy decision making (Sosa, 1997, CEC, 2002).
- Encourage the establishment of a special education parent-teacher-student association that fosters communication with school boards about this important population of students and families.
- While the federal parent handout of educational rights is required by law, widely distributing "It's Still A Good IDEA" or self-created parent-friendly special education pamphlets in your district will keep parents feeling at ease and well informed. Written information should be user-friendly and always accessible.

- Dismiss general educators who are perceived or experienced as not inclusive or who regularly send children they think are ‘special ed’ for evaluations or out of their classroom without appropriate data collection and referral procedures.
- Educators, evaluation and counseling staff, and administrators should remind themselves that parents of children with disabilities have this child at home; parents know their every-day strengths and weaknesses and should be consulted actively during the assessment phase of the referral process. Additionally, they should remind themselves that giving each child an education of best practice in the least restrictive environment will go along way to alleviating the stress of having a child with a disability. They also need to remind themselves they are in a position to increase or decrease stress on children, parents and families with the actions they take. Educators should take into consideration parent time and resource constraints, and be sensitive these issues.

Appendix L

Transcription Coding Themes and Categories

Code	Frequency
Systems	
System failure	54
Negative impact of special education on child	3
Negative feelings towards written information	16
System changes	8
Negative feelings about assessment	17
Ineffective treatment or intervention or inappropriate goals	13
Positive feelings about assessment	26
Working the system	18
Working or volunteering in the system	23
Parent recommendations	4
Special education as different and not equal	3
Lack of staff knowledge or training	12
Idealizing the system	3
Concessions made/services provided	3
Observation/experience of racism and/or classism	10
Interactions with School Professionals	
Negative feelings towards school staff	78
Positive feelings towards school staff	85
Staff validation efficacy	6
Getting an advocate	6
Difficulty defining role	15
Community professional advice & education	21
Problem parent	10
Emotional Reactions and Experiences	
Emotional strain	34
Community support	27
Home-school differing/similar values	9
Parent reflection on child or vice versa	5
General difficulty with process	6
Mastery	
Ways of getting good information	12
General positive self efficacy	18
Ways to bolster efficacy	7
Positive expectations for success	2
Race as helpful (either minority or majority)	6

	Gender advantage- Male	14
	Observation of positive self-efficacy	2
	Observation of negative self-efficacy	9
	Feelings changing over time negative	9
	Feelings changing over time positive	12
	Education attainment as helpful	12
	Age as helpful	3
Other		
	Survey positive	19
	Survey negative	12
	New to special education	23
	Uniqueness from year to year	17

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